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ABSTRACT

The conference's keynote address is presented by Bernard C. Watson. Papers include: Vantage from the State Department of Education, by Robert G. Scanlon (Pennsylvania); Minimum Competency: As the Public Sees the Question, by Jacqueline Grennan Wexler; Minimum Competency Testing (MCT): A Tripartite Response from the Profession, by W. James Popham; MCT: a Dissenting View, by Arthur E. Wise; Summary of Findings and Recommendations from a National Survey on Minimum Competencies, by Richard M. Bossone; Accountability: The Job of the Local Education Agency, by Jean F. Emmons (Trenton, N.J.); Text of Comments, by United States Representative William H. Gray, III; Problems of Implementation of Minimum Competency Requirements, by Luis Mercado (New York, N.Y.); Problems of Implementation of a State Level Perspective, by John W. Porter (Michigan); The New ABC's for a New Educational Agenda, by Chuck Stone; An Inside-Outside View of a Minimum Competency Program, by Haron J. Battle (Gary, IN); MCT: A Workable Approach, by Barry B. Beal (Denver, CO); Competency Testing, Problems and Solutions: A Legal Perspective, by David G. Carter, Sr.; MCT: Problems and Solutions for the Eighties, by Carol Anne Dwyer; and Minimum Competency: a National Responsibility, by Robert L. Ebel. (GDC)

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Proceedings of
the

SYMPOSIUM
ON
MINIMUM COMPETENCY

October 24-25, 1979

Sponsored by:

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PREFACE

On October 24-25, 1979, the opening session of the Symposium on Minimum Competency was held at the Sheraton Hotel in Philadelphia. At that time educators, members of school boards and the business community, representatives of the media, community people and students, among others, participated in sessions delineating the issues of what the New York Times of March, 1979, called, "the most powerful force in elementary and secondary education."

The question of minimum competency has many ramifications - educational, legal, social and political - all of which were discussed at the meetings. Papers from those sessions are contained in this volume in order of presentation, and we hope that these will serve as an impetus for further thought on this critical movement.

Marciene S. Mattleman
Professor, Temple University

Martin Ryder
Executive Director
Mid-Atlantic Teacher Corps
Network

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Bernard C. Watson, Ph.D.
Vice President for Academic Administration
Temple University

Today, more and more of what does or does not occur in out nation's public schools is under scrutiny. The public's concern with educational issues such as decreasing student performance, increasing violence and vandalism and the spiraling cost of education, as well as the type of mass media coverage given public education, demonstrate the extent of negativism affecting public education. These conditions give credence to the continuing demands for educational accountability.

While some accountability efforts have attempted to include teachers, and to a lesser degree administrators, the predominant effort to date has been to affect 'educational accountability' by holding the student accoutable. This student-centered approach towards accountability has been strengthened by the action of 36 of our 50 state legislatures who now mandate that tests be administered to high school students who must exhibit predetermined levels of competency as a prerequisite for graduation. It must be noted that the student-centered approach taken by each of the 36 state legislatures create complex implementation and procedural problems such as who determines what constitutes 'minimum competency'. But even so, it is clear that attempts to establish a comparable system of accountability for teachers and administrators is far more complex. One has only to consider the organizational opposition that teachers unions have mounted against 'teacher accountability'. No comparable organized opposition to date has been presented in behalf of students. Consequently, our [illegible]ssion today will focus on accountability for students--Minimum Competency.

Importance of Gathering

Our presence here today is significant not only because we as educators have convened this meeting but because we have expanded our conception of who will be involved in educational dialogue. The list of speakers and the organizations they represent make this fact apparent. We have included government officials, media specialists, and a variety of educators. Such action acknowledges that there are varying points of view and support the premise that effective educational processes must include guidance from various sources. In addition, today's forum should provide thought-provoking information and direction for policy formulation. Speakers should be as clear as possible about the conceptions, purpose and procedures they envision in regard to 'minimum competency'. This is important because it will help to establish basic rules which will govern and direct our actions. The listener also has a responsibility--he must listen for areas of agreement, disagreement and consensus in order to further enhance our dialogue.

The Standard -- Minimum Competency

It is critical in any discussion to define terms. What is meant by 'minimum competency', and what does it seek to do? For purposes of our discussion today, 'minimum competency' is defined as the condition of being adequate, having the smallest permissible quantity of skills, knowledge and experiences. 'Minimum competency' does not deal with the exceptional or with excellence. It is what is needed to 'get by'! Yet, the impact of 'not getting by' -- not passing the series of tests designed to determine one's competency -- greatly diminishes a student's ability to succeed in our increasingly complex and ever-changing world. Just think, failure to pass the competency test can result in failure to graduate and the subsequent failure to obtain a job. This series of failures greatly determines the nature of the opportunities available to the student. The apparent linkages between education and our social, political and economic systems are undeniable. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that we base our actions upon a shared definition of what constitutes 'minimum competency'. This approach will provide direction as we begin to develop additional shared elements of conception concerning how, when, where, and why we do or do not support the various views regarding 'minimum competency'.

We must operationally specify the goals of 'minimum competency'. We must also identify its benefits, risks and the consequences involved in instituting such a program not only upon the institution of education but also upon the lives of students. Have any of you thought about the terminology we are using -- 'minimum competency'? 'Minimum competency' can relegate education to simply 'getting by', which inherently does not acknowledge that education (learning) is a process and/or a combination of tasks that are sometimes difficult and not enjoyable.

We must base our assessments of 'minimum competency' in reality. Let's examine some realities.

It is a reality that 'minimum competency' focuses upon test results and not the diagnostic intent Alfred Binet envisioned for tests. This raises immediately two questions: What will we do with the test results? And, will we deal with the racial and class implications of testing? Consider these questions in your deliberations.

Current measures to institute 'minimum competency' requirements must be balanced by foresight concerning their broader psycho-social and economic consequences, and unless such efforts are open to the widest possible forum, which must include spokesmen for disadvantaged youth, the results will likely be devastating. Efforts to insure that schools provide children at least minimum preparation for adult life must not be allowed to degenerate into a movement back to the social ignorance of the pre-1960's. Graduation 'floors' are not enough. There is nothing inherently inappropriate with examining 'minimum competency' at the elementary school level. What is required is nothing less than a systematic retooling of fiscal programmatic and administrative procedures which change the delivery of educational services at the level of the child.

Too often when new programs are instituted, the inclination is to proceed as if the mere passage of legislation will somehow correct basic systemic deficiencies. This is a dangerous approach because it does not require policy or decision-makers to address or deal with the **effects** of such innovations.

We must face the reality that the quality of programs and achievement levels of too many inner-city children are three, four, even five years below the average nationwide. High school graduates are unable to read, write or perform mathematical functions at the sixth grade level. Many are unable to perform simple, everyday tasks such as completing an application for employment or writing a simple, coherent paragraph. Truancy is epidemic, psychological or physical dropping out, commonplace. Add to this the fact that many of the corridors, bathrooms, and school yards are actually dangerous for both teachers and students.

We must acknowledge that our institutions often operate at cross purposes. A case in point, Bell Telephone's recent advertisement on national television admonished the listener to "Kick the letter writing habit--use the telephone." Clearly such a message has far-reaching implications because it legitimized not writing. It is apparent that if the telephone company wanted to increase telephone usage, the message could have given without linking the use of the telephone with letter writing. Much of this type of interinstitutional incongruency is counter-productive. This could be avoided if the benefits and losses are examined prior to implementation.

It is clear that the issue of 'minimum competency' must not be borne totally by students. To expect students to produce and be held accountable for the educational process when teachers are not is not only foolish, but unrealistic. At a minimum, the issue of competency must include educators. According to Blanche Lewis of the United Parents Association, parents must also be included in discussions regarding testing. Ms. Lewis expressed two concerns. First, parents fear that the 'minimum' will somehow become the 'maximum.' Second, 'minimum competency' tests are political responses that do not address the basic issue of whether educators are educating.

'Minimum competency' must not be what we accept as the measure of 'education.' Education, by definition, must be more than a minimum.

VANTAGE FROM THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING SYMPOSIUM

Robert G. Scanlon, Secretary of Education
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania has taken a rather unique approach to the whole issue of minimum competency testing. We are one of 12 states which does not have some kind of legislative mandate. We see this issue as an educational/social problem which can be best solved in the educational/social arena. Mandates provide a political solution, one which I do not believe is appropriate for Pennsylvania. We need to keep educational decisions to educational problems in our own ball park; and in Pennsylvania we've been able to accomplish this through partnerships with schools, researchers and local communities.

Our experience in the whole area of minimum competency testing has born out the assumption that a comprehensive approach is necessary. Testing must be part of a school improvement program and should not be isolated. While testing can help us assess groups of kids in a school building or classroom, the growth of individual students, and the readiness for graduation or promotion, must have different tests for each function. We must also test based on the curriculum actually taught, not what was planned.

It is important to consider all alternatives to minimum competency testing. We should not take the fastest, most politically feasible approach without sufficient forethought and research. We must work to bridge the gap between research and practice--find out what research says that we should be doing to teach kids effectively. And then we've got to find ways to do those things. This requires working cooperatively with all segments of the educational community--parents, students, teachers, administrators, community people, business and industry.

In Pennsylvania, we've faced the issue of minimum competency on several fronts: Our Educational Quality Assessment Program gives administrators a profile of their school on 14 levels, our Pennsylvania School Improvement Program is a problem-solving approach to curriculum improvement, and our Project 81 maximizes community involvement in the establishment of competencies students need to function successfully as adults.

Each of these projects, as well as the general school improvement efforts of our Department of Education, is based on several assumptions:

1. Administrators and teachers must be competent and the curriculum sound if students are to be competent.

2. School goals and standards must be based on the unique needs and resources of the community it serves.

3. Goals, regulations, curriculum must be the basis for any testing program that is developed.

4. Partnerships are essential between educators and citizens, higher education institutions, parents, students, business, industry and government.

Let me discuss each of our projects in a bit more detail.

EQA (Educational Quality Assessment) is an outgrowth of legislative concern in 1963 about student achievement. The legislation required the department to develop a system for providing information to school administrators so they could assess their educational performance and make necessary changes.

It was agreed upon that the state would provide a comprehensive assessment system, but the local district would decide the priorities for making educational change. This is an important recognition of the partnership notion.

An EQA report develops a profile of each school, showing percentiles in 14 areas, including basic skills, citizenship, work knowledge, self-esteem, interest in school, etc. Schools are related to classes, not individual students. The report also allows schools to compare their rating with the statewide sample.

Key to the assessment program is the view that performance must be related to the school and community environment. Thus, decisions aren't made in Harrisburg. Instead, with EQA data, schools establish their own standards based on their own unique needs and resources.

This project has shown us that parents who expect their children to achieve usually have children who achieve. Scores are lower in schools where children spend much time watching television. 82 percent of the eighth graders felt their subjects are worthwhile; 77 percent feel classes are taught in a way they can understand.

The primary goal of the Pennsylvania School Improvement Program is to help educators at the local and intermediate unit levels improve the achievement of students in the basic skills of reading and mathematics. PSIP provides a structure that links research and development information to local schools. This project is helping us bridge the gap between research and practice. It is funded by the National Institute of Education.

PSIP trains local educators to analyze student needs and programs, identify a R & D outcomes and products, a select a program and implement it. We've had great success in our 12 model school districts and are looking for ways to make the program available to other districts.

Project 81, on the other hand, is not a pre-written program, but a process that forges partnerships between schools and their communities. Citizens are asked to complete the statement, "A high school graduate should be able to ______." These expectations are then made into statements of competencies. Then we identify resources in each community that could help to teach the competencies. We call on business, industry, social agencies and government. Together, we develop a system in which the competencies would be part of the graduation requirements.

Conclusion

Our experience in Pennsylvania has shown us that we need to include all aspects of the educational community in a comprehensive School Improvement Program. Testing should be a component, but not the lead-off. Instead of concentrating our efforts on testing mandated from a state legislature, we should put the responsibility in its right place.

Local boards of education should insure that their graduates are competent. Ultimately, the responsibility is theirs. If they don't do the job, we can elect different people to them. That's the traditional way of taking care of elected officials we don't agree with.

We must remember the role of the teacher is absolutely essential in school improvement. So we must upgrade the profession, provide in-service education and look for novel ways to bolster the activities of the classroom teachers. We need to find out why a small number of teachers don't teach well, and why a small number of students don't learn. Then we need to find ways to reach these people.

While minimum competency testing can provide helping information to educators and the public, it alone is not the best answer to public concern about student achievement. We must work in partnership with each other to improve education, not just test scores.

It is tempting for the state to establish standards...to assess your efforts...to tell you how good or bad a job you are doing. But that...in itself...won't end the divisiveness...that attitude won't create the sense of partnership we believe is important.

What the state should do is LEAD...SUPPORT...MOTIVATE...do whatever is necessary to help you do your jobs better. Only by working together can we make every school a good school.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY: AS THE PUBLIC SEES THE QUESTION

Jacqueline Grennan Wexler
Former President, Hunter College, Radio Commentator

Working on curriculum reform with good scientists in the sixties, I learned a number of things that will inform my thinking as long as I live. One such notion speaks to conditions which are "necessary but not sufficient." In all of the attempts to enrich curricula in the elementary and secondary schools, no serious intellectual ever questioned the critical necessity of being able to read, speak and write in the standard language of a country. Few, if any, ever questioned the necessity of being able to do basic computations, whether one manipulated numbers with pad and pencil, chalk and blackboard, slide rule, or electronic calculator. To do accurate calculations in whole numbers, fractions, decimals, or exponentials at some degree of accuracy is probably necessary for most people. But it is far from sufficient for those who would use the understanding of such processes to cope with and shape their own and society's future.

But innovators propose and practitioners dispose. Enriched materials, however powerful or misdirected, could and often did provide an embarrassment of riches in which the classroom teacher could explore enrichment and avoid necessity. If there are no measures of achievement, there are no grades--for students or teachers. Teachers have long pleaded, pressured and politicked to be accepted as professionals -- but inside and outside the profession, when push comes to shove, they argue that teaching and teachers cannot really be measured or graded.

Quite accurately, I believe, teachers insist that the teaching strengths of one teacher are not only different from those of another, but incapable of comparison on any equivalent scale. In the fear that only those things which can be measured will be taken into account in their evaluation, teachers resent, disdain, and fear evaluation.

Yet, the measurement of students is being taken very seriously. Reports of declining test results in math now get front-page headlines in the New York Times. Two-thirds of the ninth and tenth graders in the New York City schools failed the first of two math tests that will be required for graduation in 1981 by New York State. In the state as a whole, the failure rate in the ninth grade was one-third, but the out-of-city tenth graders did no better than the city kids. The concurrent reports of the National Assessment of Education Programs paralleled the New York results. Most critical and glaring in the general math incompetency was the inability of the students to apply knowledge to problem-solving.

Already critics are queing up to attack the Back-to-Basics efforts as the newest target in the cyclical attempt to find a curriculum scapegoat for the deteriorating health of our nation's schools. These critics point to new textbooks in which there is less emphasis on problem solving. They also point to the influence of minimum competency testing programs which, they believe, limits the range of a teacher's concerns.

The problem with establishing minimum competency criteria for students or teachers is clearly the decision on what shall be included and what shall be excluded from the minimum.

If the new tests and the steady decline in performance on these tests are worth our serious concern -- and I believe they are -- then we must believe that they measure with some degree of reliability areas of critical necessity in the learning curves of the young people of the nation. Skills in computation are fairly useless unless they can be applied to problem-solving, but problems involving those skills cannot be effectively solved without the ability to perform the computations with pencil, chalk, or pocket calculator. Reading words, is a necessary step to reading phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. The skill leads to, but does not turn on comprehension.

How do you get the mind to pose the question that leads to solving a problem with numbers or to comprehending the message locked up in the words? Motivation, initial and sustained, was, is, and always will be the stuff of which teaching and learning is made. Our permissive society has confused motivation with appetite. In moving from the old authoritarian patterns which undergirded reading, writing, and 'rithmetic taught to the sound of the hickory stick, some classrooms and some schools became educational street fairs trying to serve up whatever appealed to the students' learning taste at any given moment. Like permissive parents who have come to the end of their rope of patience, school teachers, school boards, and politicians lash out at the recipients of their indulgence and attempt to mend their ways by reverting to a prussian authoritarian past to make up for errors of permissiveness.

Whip lash has never cleared heads. It has caused a lot of sore necks and broken a few. The world of the hickory stick is long gone with its virtues and its considerable vices. Rote learning -- like goose-stepping military **maneuvers** -- can be laid on the masses only if we can sustain a rigid authoritarian structure. The teacher who uses the counterpart of the hickory stick in today's classroom will be up on charges by the Civil Liberties Union tomorrow.

Still, we have ample evidence in our world that a different kind of discipline pays off. Witness the dedication to detail in the world of athletics when the initial and sustained motivation is clear enough and strong enough to demand the mastery of the basics.

Our school problem will not go away by making minor or major revisions in textbooks or in criteria for textbooks for children or for their teachers. Unless kids perceive with some degree of clarity that mastery of skills has a short-term and long-term necessity for them personally, no amount of repetitive drill or proficiency testing will lead to mastery. Any one of us who has ever taught effectively inside or outside the classroom has learned where the short-term pay-offs are for our particular students. Sometimes we are creative and lucky enough to identify those pay-offs in the real world. Often we must create them by analogy.

In my earliest teaching days in secondary school, I took over a sophomore geometry class at mid-term. By the end of the first week, I had learned that almost every member of the class listed every point in the Given immediately, then most of them muddled for but not to a Proof. All weekend I struggled for a key to get them to focus first on what they were asked to prove -- then to look back for pertinent facts which might help them to make the required proof. On Monday, I scotch-taped a map of the United States to the blackboard and opened my geometry class by saying, "Let's go to Chicago." One after another, my befuddled math students found Chicago immediately on the map, then began to look for major U.S. highways going into Chicago and heading back toward El Paso. Having found one or two, they next sought the best connecting roads to El Paso itself. For the rest of the year, anytime someone in the class went back to the old listing of the Given, someone else shouted, "You forgot to look at Chicago."

A year or two later, I discovered a thirteen-year old Freshman in my beginning English class who I believed to be a highly talented girl. Her spelling was abominable and she refused to acknowledge a phenomenon called punctuation. I asked to see her after school. Her defenses crumbled when

I opened by saying that I believed spelling and punctuation were low-grade achievements. I told her that a few good and successful authors never really mastered them. Because somebody discovered their potential talent, they were able to get editors who took care of all those necessary but pedestrian jobs for them. Her face was jubilant, until I went on to tell her that I didn't mind at all who she got to be her editors. I, her teacher, was her publisher and if the stuff got to me in good form, that was fine. She developed over the years as an elegant student and a highly creative woman. Needless to say, she learned to spell and to punctuate. She has always accused me of dirty pool and elegant pedagogy.

Only the destination determines the route you take and the trouble you put up with in getting there. If real jobs exist and can be made real to kids in our schools, and those jobs require basic skills, good teachers will find ways to motivate them to acquire those skills. But if the poverty of opportunity in our urban slums or the lethargy of indulgence in our affluent suburbs provide no tangible goals to nurture or sustain motivation, the best teachers in the world face an all but hopeless task on any broad scale.

A few weeks ago, I toured the plant of Hamilton Standard, a subsidiary company of United Technologies on whose board I serve. Much more exciting than the elegant advanced technology was the elegant advanced educational process going on in that plant. The plant manager had been a young worker in the factory years ago. He has set up a recruitment program in the nearby Connecticut schools and a thirteen-week training program for those he successfully recruits. They pay no tuition, but they get no pay, only the assurance of a $13,000 a year starting salary if they "graduate," or the right to take their newly acquired skills to any other company that gives them a better offer.

Aware that kids don't live and learn in a vacuum, Frankie, the plant manager has brought parents and counsellors into the plant to let them see at first hand what is there for some of their kids if they choose to take the trouble to get there. On the whirlwind tour of his working and learning laboratories, I heard Frankie ask one young apprentice after another whose job he wanted some day. Many of them gave him the response he wanted, "Yours."

We hear lamentations about the dearth of skilled labor almost as much as we hear lamentations about the lack of motivation in our schools. If we could clone more Frankies in the world of work and infect more teachers and counsellors with his vision and spirit, we could do much to support kids and commerce in our society. Commerce thrives on the investment of capital and productive labor. Both result in the expansion of the economy and in the creation of more opportunities for productive labor.

The world of work was not far removed from schools in earlier days. Unless we find ways to close the gap between that world and the world of education for students as individuals today, I believe the most creative teachers will never find enough analogies to keep the students focused on a target. Finding ways to close the gap is as much a vested interest of the world of commerce as it is of the world of education. It is long past time that we launch a major effort involving educators and potential employers to identify, develop, and sustain real life opportunities for short and long term motivation.

Teachers are products of colleges and universities. More and more of them are products of the graduate programs of those universities. The very stuff of the academic world is the intellectual life --- and so it should be. Academic disciplines have their own sequential knowledge base and cognitive style. The basics are the lowest level skills necessary to begin the process, but so taken for granted that the scholar all but forgets their critical importance until he or she meets all too many students who cannot count on them in their pursuit of academic disciplines and degrees.

But, basics are necessary to many lives that are not self-consciously intellectual lives and certainly not academically oriented ones. Teachers, nurtured and evaluated by the more purist academic standards have a hard time respecting other sources of motivation enough to seek them out and to make them real for their students.

Real jobs must be made to exist for real kids or the schools, whatever their curricula, perpetrate a real joke upon their charges and deep down their charges know it. Teachers must work at being career counsellors and potential placement officers for dignified jobs as well as dignified professions if what they teach and how they teach it is to have the seeds of motivation over the short and long haul.

The teacher in the one-room school and the faculty in the one-school town all understood the life and commerce of the community in which they lived. The challenge of today's teachers is obviously much tougher. I doubt seriously that the self-selection or the program selection of potential teachers even attempts to identify recruits who are potentially knowledgeable and sensitive to the world of work available to their charges or which might be made available to them. I have never known an academic department or a school of education which made such knowledge and sensitivity a concern of their graduate faculty.

We teach best when we, like the students, are learning. Once we have learned the basics, we keep them in shape by continual use, most of it subconscious or half-conscious. However, the teacher who starts or sustains students in their grasp of those same basics is always searching with the students for the connection, the relatedness, the sequence that proves that the skills are really basic to what is a desirable or necessary pay-off.

Good teachers need and deserve good curriculum materials, good textbooks, and good courses of study. Good teachers need to play a part in their development. But no curriculum materials, no textbooks, no course of study is teacher-proof. If we bring the wrong people into the profession and if we keep them there when they are clearly less than good at the job, a seminar like this a decade from now will find skills assessments of students very depressing and will long have deserted any attempt to assess minimum competency for teachers. Far more important and far more depressing will be the deepening malaise for all too many of our nation's young who fail to find a tangible goal for their potential talents and hard work. A foundation for which we can see no superstructure isn't really worth building.

We should not run away from testing students for minimum competencies even though we know we will fail to include some competencies that prove to be of real importance. We should not run away from the determination to assess teachers on minimum competency, although determining the extent and the closure of those competencies is a task for a corporate Solomon. I have suggested today an attitude and a determination I would include as a critical necessity in any assessment I would make of potential or practicing teachers. I doubt that it is included in any prospectus put together by a faculty committee.

However, we can take some hope that universities and schools of education are opening up to question the question and to include "heretics" in suggesting the responses. Good testing follows and attempts to order good taste. I congratulate you for your good taste.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING: A TRIPARTITE RESPONSE FROM THE PROFESSION*

W. JAMES POPHAM

Instructional Objectives Exchange
and
Professor, University of California, Los Angeles

My perception of the education profession's response to minimum competency testing is based on personal interaction with educators throughout the United States during the past four years. During that period, I have had extensive conversation with state-level and local-level architects of minimum competency programs. My perceptions are premised, therefore, less on what I have read than on what I have heard in face-to-face discussions with the educators who are actually embroiled in minimum competency testing programs.

Although the responses of educators to minimum competency testing is quite varied, I have been able to detect three dominant response orientations that seem to guide the reactions of most educators to minimum competency testing. While one rarely encounters any of these response syndromes in "pure" form, since schizoid behavior is as prevalent in education as elsewhere, the following three responses to minimum competency testing seem to reflect the profession's reaction to this new movement.

Compliance

The first response to minimum competency testing program is one of compliance. Educators who adopt this response attempt to do little more than avoid illegality in their response to minimum competency testing.

They simply "go through the motions" in an effort to comply with whatever legislation or regulations have been promulgated regarding minimum competency testing.

Often, the teachers who subscribe to a compliance orientation are, whether admitting it or not, fearful of the future teacher evaluation implications of minimum competency testing. After all, once tests are in place, cannot student performance on such tests be used to appraise the worth of teachers?

Compliance-oriented educators may also view minimum competency testing as just another in education's long parade of fads. Buffeted by such fads through the years, these educators recall the hula hoopla of PPBS or, many years earlier, the core curriculum. We can safely predict that educators who adopt a compliance-oriented response to minimum testing will do little to improve quality of their educational programs. To comply at the lowest level does not augur well for the instructional improvement.

Assurance

The second educator response to minimum competency testing programs is one of assurance. Those adopting an assurance response attempt to placate the public, that is, to assure the public that sufficiently formidable assessment hurdles have been erected so that no "undeserving" youngster will be awarded a high school diploma. Educators who adopt this stance are chiefly concerned about themselves rather than students, for their prime drive is to create a good public relations image, namely, that the school has "respectable standards." By adopting this posture, in hopes of assuring the public that educational standards are sufficiently exacting, assurance-oriented educators hope to avoid the public criticism that has been leveled against them in recent years.

There are some instances in which this assurance orientation has yielded big benefits for educators by allowing citizens to view educators as "tough." In the state of Florida, for example, the legislative and citizen support of the state's minimum competency testing program and those at the state level who implement it has been genuinely astonishing in its positive nature.

Assurance-oriented educators typically tend to set high standards in their programs. In one northern California school district, for example, the school board set a minimum competency standard for high school graduation such that no student would receive a diploma who was not, upon graduation, fully qualified for admission to the University of California.

Again, as with the compliance orientation, we can predict scant improvement in educational quality as a consequence of an assurance orientation to minimum competency testing.

Enhancement

The final response to minimum competency testing is substantially different from the former two. Educators who adopt an enhancement orientation are unconcerned about the origins of the movement, that is, they disregard the fact that minimum competency was laid on education by the public rather than being a creation of educational establishment itself. Enhancement-oriented educators assert that irrespective of its beginnings, minimum competency testing programs can serve as potentially useful catalysts for instructional improvement. In essence, enhancement-oriented educators attempt to co-opt the minimum competency movement by making it a strong lever for the improvement of instruction.

One of the best examples of an enhancement orientation can be seen in the Detroit Public Schools where Superintendent Arthur Jefferson and his colleagues have, of their own volition, initiated a minimum competency testing program with the avowed purpose of strengthening the instructional program of the Detroit Public School. These instructional-improvement aspirations extend not only to the basic skills, but, across the entire curriculum. By demonstrating that an improvement-focused program can succeed in reading, writing, and mathematics, it is hoped that Detroit educators will wish to employ similar instructional tactics in other phases of their curriculum.

Detroit educators have isolated 12 powerful competencies, four each in reading, writing, and mathematics, which serve as the focus of their competency testing program. Precise descriptions of these 12 skills are provided to teachers, along with ample suggestions regarding how teachers might approach instruction regarding these competencies. In addition, the subskills which the teacher would have to promote in order for students to master the 12 competencies are also isolated. Ample practice exercises are provided for teachers to use in their classes. A variety of inservice support is provided for teachers so that they can become more and more adept in the promotion of the 12 target competencies. Detroit educators are optimistic that, after a few years of instruction aimed at clearly defined target competencies, a majority of Detroit youngsters will be able to master not only the minimum competencies, but a number of more advanced skills as well.

As one views the activities of enhancement-oriented educators, it is quite clear that they are deliberately using the minimum competency program as a significant opportunity for educational improvement. Educators who adopt such an orientation are, for the most part, dissatisfied with the current caliber of schooling and are anxious to promote improvements in that enterprise. By seizing the impetus supplied by competency testing initiatives, enhancement-oriented educators anticipate a genuine boost in the quality of their instructional programs.

Decision Impact

Quite naturally, these three response orientations influence a host of decisions that are made with respect to the implementation of minimum competency testing programs. For example, compliance-oriented and assurance-oriented educators select or construct tests for their programs with little attention to the instructional sensitivity of such measures. Enhancement-oriented educators are most concerned that the tests which they select not only provide diagnostic cues for students who initially fail to master the requisite competencies, but that those tests also provide lucid targets for instructional design.

With respect to performance standards, compliance-oriented educators can set standards pretty much as they wish. One suspects that they might as well use a "table of random standards," since as long as standards of any kind have been set, requirements are usually satisfied. Assurance-oriented educators will typically set standards sufficiently high to warrant public admiration. Enhancement-oriented educators will, on the other hand, try to set reasonable/attainable standards in the short term and elevate those standards incrementally as time goes by. Many enhancement-oriented educators are setting standards which rise as much as 10 percent each year for the next several years.

Scores of other important decision categories exist in which the response orientation of educators to minimum competency programs dramatically influence the kinds of decisions that are made. For example, in the selection of instruction materials, and in the nature of inservice support, the three orientations are significantly influential.

In review, I have suggested that three relatively distinctive response mentalities are encountered in the educational profession with respect to minimum competency testing programs. Whereas in a given setting different educators may display different orientations, there will usually be one orientation that will predominate.

I am not convinced that minimum competency testing will benefit American education. On balance, it may be that its deficits will outweigh its dividends. But I am certain that the minimum competency movement will not benefit American schooling if we do not give it a reasonable chance to succeed.

Educators who approach minimum competency testing with a compliance or assurance mentality are dooming it to certain failure. It seems to me that what we should be with minimum competency testing is to give it its best chance to contribute something worthwhile to American schooling, then evaluate it rigorously on all counts to see whether it yields more benefits than harm. If we are to give minimum competency testing a reasonable chance to succeed, then I am certain that educators must adopt an orientation which is fundamentally one of enhancement.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING: A DISSENTING VIEW

Arthur E. Wise
The Rand Corporation

My talk is labelled "A Dissenting View," and from what I can understand about yesterday's proceedings, I am not sure how dissenting a voice I present.[1] Nonetheless, I shall try to draw the issue a little more sharply, perhaps, than some of the other speakers did yesterday.

I believe that minimum competency testing cannot be considered in isolation from other developments in American education today. Minimum competency testing is the latest effort in educational policy formulation external to the local school system. By 1974, there had been 73 accountability laws passed in one or more of our states. There had been numerous decisions on school finance which have affected local school systems. With regard to federal legislation, in 1964 it was possible to write all the pieces of federal legislation in 80 pages. By 1976, it took 360 pages. Federal regulations in 1965 could be written in 92 pages. By 1977, it took 1,000 pages. Consider federal court decisions. Between 1946 and 1956, we had 112 federal decisions concerned with education. Between 1956 and 1966, 729, and in the next four years, 1,200. All of these policies represent new efforts by policymakers outside the local school system to affect the course of these systems.

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[1] Most of the points made in this presentation are drawn from Arthur E. Wise, *Legislated Learning: The Bureaucratization of the American Classroom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

It is time now that we begin to understand what the impact of all this is upon local school systems. Frequently, educational policies are based upon seemingly unassailable common sense and at their bedrock, they have a strong appeal. Certainly we all subscribe to the notion that children should leave school with minimal competencies and that they should have been prepared by their school systems to face the challenges of life. But the road between the establishment of that worthy objective and the kinds of actions which we see in local school systems designed to improve students' attainment of the minimal competencies is a long, tortuous one and one which may, in fact, not achieve that worthy objective.

As I mentioned, there are lots and lots of policies. They all begin with unassailable common sense. They are very hard for educators to argue against. Some policies call for the clear statement of objectives. Now, how can anyone take issue with a clear statement of objectives? Certainly the clear statement of objectives is better than a fuzzy statement of objectives and certainly the statement of objectives is better than no objectives at all. Or is it? Where does that process take us once we begin it? Other policies begin with other commonsensical notions--it is good to plan. Certainly educators cannot claim that we should not plan in our school systems. It is good to coordinate and some policies begin with that premise. How can educators claim that it is poor policy to coordinate what we do in the schools? So we have set in motion many, many educational policies in the last several decades which begin with seemingly unassailable common sense but which take us down a road which may not always seem to lead to the attainment of the objectives which those policies call for.

Policies that we have seen coming from the federal government, the state government, and the courts have one of two principal objectives. I want you to listen very carefully because this distinction is going to be critical as I go along. Some policies are concerned with equity within the school system and other policies are concerned with the productivity of the school system. Some policies are concerned with both equity and productivity. Let me define these terms. Equity, for me, has to do with the allocation of resources to students or the assignment of students to resources or programs. Equity has to do with the apportionment of money, with the assignment of teachers, with the classification of students in non-discriminatory ways. We know when we are achieving equity or at least when we are moving toward equity when we measure the numbers of dollars being spent on rich and poor children, black and white children, and so on. Notice, I did not say that we must necessarily spend the same amount of money on different kinds of children, but I have said and I would say that we must have reasonable classifications of children as we assign resources to them. Equity is generally tangible. We can, for example, discover whether we have proper representation in programs for women, minorities, and so on. It is something which we can generally measure in percentages, dollars, or program availability. Equity is one of the principal objectives that we have been pursuing in educational legislation.

The other term that I would like to call your attention to is productivity. Productivity has to do with the efficiency or effectiveness with which those resources are employed once they are made available to students. Productivity is something which is difficult to measure. The term, productivity, is adopted from economists' jargon.

Productivity generally means that with a given amount of resources, we wish to attain the greatest amount of results or, for any given level of results, we would like to use the least amount of resources to attain them. Equity and productivity are the two objectives which most of the important policies have been pursuing. As I mentioned, sometimes the policies confuse the two. Sometimes they pursue both equity and productivity objectives at the same time and sometimes policies are directed toward one or the other. But it is crucial as I move on for you to understand this distinction.

I'd like now to turn to three policy arenas so that you can see the interplay between equity and productivity concerns. In 1954, there was *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case, the premier case, concerned with equity in American public education. And what that case said at the core was that it is unlawful to classify children on the basis of race before assigning them to schools. That is, we were obliged under the U.S. Constitution to desegregate our school systems. Well, there have been many decisions following *Brown v. Board of Education* and, in the course of them, things have changed quite a bit. While I can't trace that whole history, I would like to draw your attention to a case known as *Milliken v. Bradley* affecting the Detroit public schools. That case was decided recently by the U.S. Supreme Court and while it did give a little bit of attention to the issue of desegregation, it gave a lot more attention to some other things. In the first place, the U.S. Supreme Court said to the Detroit Board of Education, "you must institute a specific reading program, a specific testing program, a specific guidance counseling program, and a specific teacher training program." In other words, the U.S. Supreme Court told the school district of Detroit precisely which four programs were to be implemented in that school district. Well, that's a lot different than moving children or teachers around the school district. That is a profound change in the way that we make decisions about American education. At the same time, in *Milliken v. Bradley*, the U.S. Supreme Court held the State Board of Education in Michigan equally responsible for the segregation which had existed in Detroit and now the State Board of Education in Michigan feels responsible not only for segregation which has been found in Detroit, but for segregation throughout the State of Michigan, and that State Board of Education is now finding ways by which it can influence the course of events throughout the state. So that single decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Milliken v. Bradley* established rather firmly the idea that courts could tell school districts what to do programmatically and established the notion that the state board had an operational, as opposed to supervisory responsibility, vis-à-vis local school districts. Equity and productivity concerns, you see, have become intermingled.

I'm moving now to another policy arena, that of school finance reform. Some years ago, I became concerned with the inequality in the amount of money available for students which existed from school district to school district. Some school districts had a lot of money to spend, other school districts had little money to spend, and the state was permitting this condition to exist. And so we began to argue in the courts that it was unconstitutional for the state to permit this condition to continue. That is, the state had some responsibility for education, some responsibility for educational finance, and therefore, the state should be obliged to equalize educational expenditures across the state. A number of court decisions came down and began to move in that direction. But here, too, a disturbing development has come underway and the courts have become less concerned with equity, with the allocation of resources, with movement of money around the state, and more concerned with the productivity of the school system. At least four of the decisions which have come down recently--Washington State, New Jersey, New York, and West Virginia--have been much more concerned with the establishment of minimal educational standards than they had been concerned with the movement of money around the state. And so an issue which arose on the basis of equity is now much more concerned with the issue of productivity. Perhaps the premier case in this area is *Robinson v. Cahill* in New Jersey which began some ten years ago as a case concerned with the equalization of educational expenditures across the state. What has resulted in an ensuing court decision and interactions between the court and the legislature is the imposition of a new system called "thorough and efficient" education in the State of New Jersey. While the state has been busy developing the thorough and efficient system, which we should understand to be a system of minimum competency testing by and large, the state has gone on distributing money in even more inequitable fashion than was the case prior to the implementation of the court decree--a paradox to be sure.

Let me turn to another arena--Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. When that law was enacted in 1965, it was a principal component of the war on poverty and it was a recognition that we were spending less money on the education of poor children than we were spending on the education of more well off children and so the federal government began to allocate additional resources to local school districts based on the numbers and percentages of children from low-income families. It began then as a kind of equity issue, but soon in fact, very soon after the enactment of Title I, it became clear that the measure of success of Title I was not whether some extra resources were reaching some children in whom we were under-investing in the past, but the measure of success became how much are reading scores going up. School systems had to impose or create evaluation systems. There had to be pre-tests and post-tests, and school districts which now had an extra $100 or $200 to spend on young people in whom we were already spending substantially less were called upon to show on an annual basis what increments in reading scores they were achieving. Of course, we had some difficulty demonstrating those rapid results and Congress had reason then to begin to wonder if it was worthwhile to continue to invest in Title I.

Well, I've touched on these three areas, I think, rather quickly in a way, trying to show you that we are pursuing equity issues and productivity issues simultaneously. Both are worthy objectives, but sometimes one will get in the way of the other. Let me be a little more specific. Because of the way we are now approaching desegregation issues, we have come to evaluate desegregation as a public policy by the extent to which it increases the performance of young black children and not affect adversely the performance of young white children when in fact desegregation is at the core, a moral issue. Because we have been so concerned with judging its effects upon achievement, we have, it seems to me, been moving rather more slowly on desegregation than we might otherwise have. With respect to school finance reform, people have expected that with the movement of money around the state we would be able to show immediate gains in achievement. When those gains in achievement don't show up very rapidly, we have an excuse for failing to move to equalize educational expenditures between rich children and poor children. Finally, with respect to Title I, again here, as we keep questioning on an annual basis these incremental resources, we perhaps have invested less than we might otherwise have if we were to realize that the primary goal was the equalization of resources rather than immediate gains in achievement.

At the state legislative level, we have witnessed something else and here there has been little concern with equity and an obsessive concern with the productivity of the school system. Those of you in the room who are educators will recognize a dizzying array of accountability systems that you will have heard about in the last ten years. Within the last ten years, we have introduced in one or more of our states the following: accountability, planning programming budgeting systems, management-by-objectives, systems analysis, management-information systems, management science, planning models, performance-based education, competency-based teacher education, assessment systems, program evaluation, and learner verification. That's about half of the list in fact. Each of these are systems, most of which were devised elsewhere and were brought to education, were instituted as a matter of state law, in the belief that their imposition would quickly result in the improvement of educational achievement in the schools. Some of the systems were not imports. Educators, professors of education, and educational developers had begun to develop the more specific educational versions, like performance-based education and competency-based teacher education--highly systematic approaches to the conduct of education. What is the consequence of all this, we must begin to ask? We have now been pushed to a development which I call "legislated learning," a highly legalistic approach to the development of educational policies and practices, the premier version of which is minimum competency testing. The idea seems to be that by legislative fiat we will cause poor students to learn and poor teachers to teach by the imposition of a statewide minimum competency test for high school graduation. Should a child fail to attain minimum competency, the penalty will be certified incompetence.

At the federal level, we have been concerned with the education of handicapped children and we passed the landmark legislation known as 94-142. That is an important piece of legislation. It directs our attention to the need to educate handicapped children, in my view, a worthy objective. However, there are a lot of other requirements that have come along with 94-142. They are called individualized education plans, least restrictive environment, and lots and lots of due process. And, in fact, if one reads 94-142 very carefully, one will see that, by it, the federal government is not merely assuring that education will be made available to handicapped children but is ensuring that effective education will be made available to such children. That, it seems to me, is nothing but an invitation to lawsuits to find out whether, in fact, the education that has been delivered to the handicapped child is effective or not.

Lurking on the horizon is something called the educational malpractice lawsuit. The idea here is that a plaintiff will challenge either a teacher or a school system for failure to teach the child. These suits have not succeeded yet, but they will. The idea seems to be that if we find the school system or the teacher liable for educational malpractice that that by itself will cause the school system to teach that child more effectively. In the past, educational malpractice suits have not succeeded. They have not succeeded because in the past the school system has never had anything like a contract with the child. It has never specified the nature of education which it was going to deliver to the child. Now we have lots and lots of ways in which we promise very specifically what it is we are going to deliver to the child. We are going to make that youngster minimally competent. If we do not make that youngster minimally competent, I think we have every reason to believe that such youngsters or attorneys representing them will be prepared to bring lawsuits.

In New Jersey, we have a slightly different approach to legislated learning evolving out of the *Robinson v. Cahill* decision. Every child in New Jersey has the right to a thorough and efficient education, whatever that may mean and some day we may figure that out. Educational policymaking has become, in short, more centralized than it used to be. The basic problem, though, with most of these policies concerned with improving the productivity of the system, is that they do not contain any new theory of education. They rest at the core on such ideas as a contractual relationship between the school system and the youngster or they rest at the core on the idea that if we state objectives very carefully, we will be improving the quality of education or that if we test a lot, we will be improving the quality of education. Now we have many policies based upon no theory of education or an impoverished theory of education. Are we surprised when these policies then do not work? These policies are intended to rationalize school systems. Rationalization, of course, is good if it works. That is, it is good to tighten up the procedures, if, in fact, when you tighten up procedures, something good happens. I like to refer to some of these policies as hyperrational, however, when all they result in is the imposition of new procedures, new policies, new requirements, without in fact achieving the goals which they purport to achieve. We seem to be operating, as I suggested, on an impoverished theory of education and what these policies seem to be implying are several things. Let me talk about them briefly.

First of all, there are schools. How do schools operate? Schools are, of course, bureaucracies. They must be. They are big institutions. They have to handle lots of people. They have complex matters to take care of. What these policies seem to be saying is that schools are not bureaucratic enough and that if only we will make schools more bureaucratic, they will become better institutions. If only we will state their objectives more carefully, if only we will increase the number of people in the hierarchy, they will become better. If only we introduce more rules, more procedures, and more standards, schools as bureaucracies will function better. Well, that, it seems to me, is a concept that some of us might wonder about. With respect to teachers, teachers like to think of themselves as professionals, but in fact they are professionals who have to work in a bureaucracy. What

What these policies seem to imply with reference to the role of teacher is now the teacher is too much of a professional and not enough of a bureaucrat. So what we must do is help the teacher become a better bureaucrat by prescribing for the teacher the kind of behavior which we expect the teacher to perform. One of the hallmarks of bureaucracy is the very precise job description for every person in the bureaucracy and so what you have then in such movements as CBE and CBTE is an elaborate way by which to instruct the teacher about what to do. And lastly, this way of thinking about education has implications for the kind of education which we are trying to deliver to our young people. The approach regards the youngster as a passive organism, one who sits there with an open cranium, ready to have it filled with skills, with cognitive skills and basic skills and other such skills so that the youngster will be able to leave school with those skills minimally necessary to prepare him to function in society. This view of education is not universally shared. There are those who think there are other ways to think about education. For example, the youngster may be considered an active organism, even one who ought to be prepared to take part in his own educational experience, to shape his own educational experience. There are those who think that youngsters should be prepared to do more than take their place in society. They ought to be prepared to go out and challenge society. But these views have no place in the minimum competency testing approach and other evolving approaches.

Another theme that I have tried to strike through here, as I have spoken, is to raise the spectre of expansion of the state role in education. I have mentioned that it is clearly the case that the state has prime responsibility for education. Legal responsibility for education in every state in the nation rests in the state legislature. Over the years, for reasons of convenience, state legislatures have delegated responsibility to local school districts. They can take that back at any time and they are beginning to do that, and precisely that is how we are to understand such movements as minimum competency testing.

Well, if I were landing from Mars, I might wonder what is it that is causing this frenzied set of policy developments in American public education. I would suppose if I were the man from Mars that the educational system in the United States must be falling apart. Otherwise, what would justify these extraordinary interventions in the way we operate American public education? I would think, for example, that the productivity of the system was declining, but what is the evidence on that score? Well, there really isn't complete evidence on that score, but let me mention a few things which might suggest that the educational system in the United States is not quite so bad as the media would have us think. There is something called the National Assessment of Educational Progress. I think most of you are likely to be aware of it. Periodically, it tests a random sample of young people in the United States. Let me cite one set of statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Between 1971 and 1975, reading tests administered to 9, 13, and 17 year olds were either stable or increasing. Most dramatically, during the period in which most of this frenzy evolved, scores of young black students were increasing disproportionately. That is, the gaps between white and black young people were closing.

In Indiana, a study was done comparing the performance of young people between 1944 and 1976. That was a test which had been originally administered in 1944 and was readministered in 1976. And in general, what that study found was that in 1976, 10th graders were superior. The average 10th grader was superior in 1976 to the average 10th grader in 1944 despite the fact that there was a substantial drop-out rate in 1944 and most of the children were in school in 1976. So the average went up even as the percentage of students retained in school went up.

Lastly, I would like to call your attention to the college boards, which is the basis for most of the sensational publicity which suggests that test scores and school performance are declining. Yes, the college boards have declined somewhat in recent years. The average performance on college board scores, we are told by the College Board, has been declining and yet that has occurred in an era in which the number of people taking the test has increased dramatically between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. Numbers of people who never would have taken the test are taking the test; women are taking the test, blacks are taking the test, lower ability white males are taking the test. Dramatic expansion in the number of people taking the test has occurred even as there has been but a modest reduction in the average scores. Is that something to be deplored? Well, I think not. I think it is remarkable that we can watch relative stability in the test scores as large numbers of new people are taking the test.

If it is not the case that performance is declining absolutely, what else might we attribute this phenomenon to? I don't have a really good answer, but my friend from Mars, who is also a political scientist, asks what groups favor minimum competency testing? What groups disfavor it? He says, perhaps, if I understand who likes it and who doesn't like it, I can get a better fix on it. And we discover that state legislators like minimum competency testing. It doesn't cost them anything and they can say to the people of the state, "look, we are upgrading the quality of education in the state." So state legislators tend to like it. State boards tend to be a little bit more ambivalent except in cases like Pennsylvania where the state board has managed to move in before the state legislature has. In general, state boards don't like minimum competency testing because what it does is take over the role which they have had and normally it has been the case that the state legislature calls for minimum competency testing, thus usurping one of the prime roles of the state board of education. State departments of education love minimum competency because state commissioners of education and their staffs get to administer these new tests. In fact, we even notice that the number of state personnel increase when minimum competency testing is introduced. Educational developers who develop such things as minimum competency testing and people who make tests seem to like minimum competency testing. I won't inquire into their motives. Local boards tend not to like minimum competency testing because they tend to believe that it is their job to set the goals for education. Local administrators are somewhat ambivalent about minimum competency testing, because, on the one hand, it gives them something of a handle on teachers and on the other hand, they are subjected to new state constraints. Teachers, of course, pretty nearly universally dislike minimum competency testing because for them it presents no help in dealing with the problems once identified. For teachers, it represents but one more way in which the deficiencies of students are identified and provides no new way of coping with those deficiencies. So I don't know whether that helps you to understand why such movements as minimum competency testing are evolving, but it is certainly the case that it represents a powershift on the part of the American educational system, a shift upward away from the classroom, away from the teacher, and upward toward the state bureaucracy.

Well, what do I propose instead? Taking all of these developments together, minimum competency testing being but one of them, we are witnessing what I call the incremental bureaucratic centralization of American education. Slowly and inexorably we are making the schools more bureaucratic and more centralized through such mechanisms as these, and we must always ask the question in the process, is the system getting any better or per chance is the system getting worse? Instead, I guess I would opt for, if I were able, a somewhat different division of labor because what you have going on here is that everyone is trying to do everything. We have lots of different people trying to make the system work more equitably and lots of people trying to make the system more productive and I think what we need to do is to differentiate assignments. I, for one, would be prepared to restore a heavy measure of responsibility to local school boards and if they don't perform the way we want them to perform, well, then, normally we can find ways of dealing with that. We can fire them or not have them reelected. Anything which is going to improve American education has to come to terms with the quality of teaching and the quality of teachers. There are no short-cuts on this one. Only in-service education and the selection of better teachers will lead ultimately to the improvement of American education. I think we need substantial research yet on the question of why it is that we have some youngsters who do not learn well in our schools as currently constituted. Again, there is no short cut. We have some real problems in American education and we don't really have the answers. We need to find ways of solving them. In other words, I am suggesting that research on American educational problems is probably a role for the federal government. Except for that, I think the search for quality and the emphasis on productivity needs to be conducted at the local level, the level of the school board or below. However, we can't turn the clock back, we don't want to turn the clock back. Issues of equity in American education are profoundly important and I don't trust them to the vagaries of local school politics and so I would argue that we must continue vigorously to press the case for equity between blacks and whites and between men and women and so on at the federal level and through the judiciary. The issue of school finance, it seems to me, remains an issue for state governments and state governments must be made to respond if ever we are going to begin to move toward a condition of equality of educational opportunity in our country. In short, what I am suggesting is that minimum competency testing is but one more effort to try to reform schools--to make them better on the cheap--and it is not going to succeed. It is merely going to distract us from the hard work necessary to solve the serious problems of American education. I thank you.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY ON MINIMUM COMPETENCIES

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Summary of Findings

In light of the recent and varied efforts of many states to introduce minimum competency testing as a criterion for high school graduation and, in some cases, for grade promotion, this study primarily set out (1) to identify those competencies which various segments of the population believe to be important for functioning adults in our society, and (2) to ascertain which competencies should be taught in the schools.

This study, conducted during the academic year 1977-78, involved 2,284 students, 245 parents, 144 teachers, 86 administrators, 43 board members, 75 employers, and 31 legislators.

In keeping with the purpose of the study, five main objectives were proposed: (1) to select a representative sample of students, parents, teachers, administrators, board members, employers, and legislators to participate in the research effort; (2) to elicit relevant background information from each group of respondents; (3) to identify student problems in reading, writing, arithmetic, listening, and speaking; (4) to identify the key adult-functional competencies that each group considered important enough to be taught in secondary schools; and (5) to identify the most desirable approach for a minimum competency program.

Within the scope of the data collected for this study, the following conclusions were reached:

1. The first purpose of the project, to select a representative sample of students, parents, teachers, administrators, board members, employers, and legislators to participate in this study, was achieved by sending questionnaires to the groups according to geographical area: the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the Far West. Questionnaires were also proportionately distributed according to population area: urban, suburban, and rural. Students, teachers, administrators, and board members were asked to describe the area--urban, suburban, or rural--in which their school districts were located, and teachers, administrators, and board members were asked to indicate the total student enrollment in their districts.

1.1 An even distribution of returns was received from the four geographical areas mentioned above.

1.2 The majority of the parents and legislators were from suburban and rural areas, and the majority of the employers, from urban and suburban areas.

1.3 Nearly half of the students reported that they attended schools in urban areas, and the next largest group (over one third), that they go to suburban schools; the remainder attended rural schools. Nearly fifty percent of the teachers taught in suburban schools, and slightly less than a third, in urban schools; the remainder taught in rural schools. The largest number of administrators indicated that their schools were located in suburban areas, and the next largest number, in urban areas. The response from board members was more evenly distributed than the responses from any other group. More than one third of the board members reported that their school districts were in rural areas, and slightly less than a third, in suburban and in urban areas, respectively.

1.4 A small percentage of the teachers, administrators, and board members who responded to the question on school district enrollment indicated that their districts had enrollments of over 40,000 students. The majority of the respondents, however, reported that their school districts had between 5,000 and 20,000 students.

2. The second objective, to elicit background information from the respondents, was accomplished by requesting each group to give certain varied information that was relevant to this study.

2.1 Parents, perhaps the group most concerned about the implementation of minimum competency testing in the schools, were asked to give the following information: sex, age, marital status, ethnic origin, number of children, number of school-age children living at home, family income, job title, and academic background.

Approximately two thirds of the parents were females, and one third were males. The majority of the parents were between the ages of 30 and 49, and the vast majority indicated that they were married. Over 85% of the parents identified themselves as caucasians. The average number of children in each family was 3, and over 85% of the parents reported that they had school-age children living at home.

The vast majority of the parents had family incomes of over $15,000. We may infer that many of these families had two incomes, since over 40% of the women respondents reported that they worked. The majority of these were white collar workers, educators, and middle managers. The majority of the male respondents were professionals, educators, and middle managers. Very few of the parents were blue collar workers or laborers, perhaps because over 75% of the parents reported that they had college backgrounds. Less than one fourth of the parents had no schooling beyond the high school level, and only one parent had not finished high school. That the majority of the respondents had above-average incomes and educations may be attributed to the fact that the parents surveyed for this study were selected from lists supplied by Parent-Teacher Associations in all states.

2.2 Students were asked to specify their grade, primary language, whether they held jobs, their primary outside activities, their academic records and academic objectives. Since high school students will be primarily affected by the implementation of minimum competency testing, the majority of the questionnaires were sent to students in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. A small number of questionnaires were also distributed to students in the 9th grade and to those in their first- or second-year of college.

One third of the responses were from students in the 10th grade. Slightly more than one fourth of the students were in the 12th grade and slightly less than one fourth, and the 11th grade. The other responses were evenly distributed among students in the 9th grade, in their first year of college, and in their second year of college.

More than 80% of the students reported that English was their primary home language. More than 40% of the students had jobs and worked an average of 18.8 hours a week, but most did not find "jobs" as time-consuming as social activities. The largest number of students--over 40%--listed social events as their primary activity. Slightly more than 18% listed outside work, 16% homework, and 1% reading.

The majority of the respondents indicated that they were honor or above-average students, while less than one third described themselves as average. Only 1.1% of the students indicated that they were below average. The vast majority of the students expected to attend college, and over 55% reported that they intended to finish college. However, teachers, administrators, and board members did not agree with the students' high appraisal of themselves; therefore, one can conclude that the students' reports of their high academic achievements and objectives may be somewhat unrealistic.

2.3 Teachers were asked to indicate which grades and subjects they taught. The vast majority of the respondents were high school teachers, and most of these taught more than one grade. The major subjects taught by these teachers were: English, Mathematics, Vocational Studies, the Social Sciences, and the Sciences.

2.4 Teachers, administrators, and board members were asked how many years they had been in their present positions. They were also asked to identify the degrees they held and to indicate whether they were interested in further schooling.

Approximately half of the teachers and administrators reported that they had been in their positions for ten years or less, and half indicated that they had been in their positions for eleven or more years. The vast majority of the board members had held their positions for fewer than ten years.

Approximately half of the teachers reported that they had bachelor degrees or technical training and half that they had master degrees. Only one teacher had a doctorate degree. In contrast, nearly 90% of the administrators had graduate degrees. Indeed, more than one third of the administrators had doctorate degrees. More than half of the board members reported that they had bachelor or graduate degrees. Over 23% did not respond to this question, and most of the others indicated that they had high school diplomas or some college or technical training.

Over 40% of the teachers reported that they were interested in further education, the majority of which indicated that they would like to obtain master degrees. A very small percentage of the board members and administrators reported that they were interested in further education.

2.5 Employers were asked to indicate their job titles, years in present position, education background and to indicate whether their responsibilities include the screening of applicants and whether their firms have minimum requirements for employment.

The majority of the respondents were managers, directors, officers, or owners, and the majority had been in their positions for ten or fewer years. The vast majority had graduated from college. Less than half of the employers reported that their firms had minimum requirements for employment, and the majority of these specified a high school diploma. Since questionnaires were sent to employers in a wide range of business, industrial, and service organizations, many replied that requirements depended on the position.

2.6 Legislators were asked to describe their constituencies, to indicate how many years they had been in their positions, and to give their educational backgrounds.

More than 30% of the legislators did not describe their constituencies. Of those that did, the largest response was from those who served suburban areas. The majority of legislators had been in office for ten or fewer years, and the vast majority were college graduates.

3. The third objective, to identify student problems in the basic skills, was accomplished by requesting (i) parents, employers, and legislators to indicate the degree of proficiency that students had achieved in reading, writing, mathematics, listening, and speaking, and (ii) students, teachers, administrators, and board members to identify the particular problems students had in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. They were also asked whether or not students were good listeners and speakers.

3.1 The vast majority of parents, employers, and legislators indicated that students have achieved some reading proficiency. Students seemed to agree with this evaluation since a majority reported that they had very little or no difficulty in any of the five reading areas: understanding the meaning of words in context, grasping central ideas, grasping supporting ideas, understanding the author's purpose, and integrating reading matter with experience. Students did indicate, however, that they had the most difficulty in grasping supporting ideas.

Teachers, administrators, and board members did not agree with the students' evaluation. A majority in each group reported that students had some or great difficulty in all five areas. Teachers and board members did agree, however, that students have the most difficulty in grasping supporting ideas, whereas administrators reported that students have the most difficulty in understanding the author's purpose.

3.2 A slight majority of parents and legislators reported that students had some proficiency in writing, but the vast majority of employers believed that students had very little proficiency in this area. The majority of students again reported that they had very little or no difficulty in the areas listed under writing: organizing ideas, stating ideas clearly, constructing sentences without gross errors; understanding punctuation and mechanics; using words properly; spelling; and writing legibly. However, a larger number of students indicated that they had some or great difficulty in writing than they did in reading. Organizing ideas and stating ideas clearly were the two areas in which students indicated they had the most difficulties.

Again, teachers, administrators, and board members did not agree completely with the students' evaluation. A vast majority in all groups indicated that students had some or great difficulties in writing. Teachers reported that students had the most difficulties in organizing ideas and in spelling. Administrators and legislators agreed that the students had the most difficulties in organizing ideas and in stating ideas clearly.

3.3 A significant number of parents and legislators reported that students had some proficiency in mathematics. The majority of employers, however, indicated that students had little proficiency in this area. In contrast, over two thirds of the students reported that they had no difficulty in adding properly, subtracting properly, multiplying properly, and dividing properly. They did report, however, that they had the most difficulties in solving problems properly, with 40% reporting that they had very little difficulty and 40%, no difficulty.

The majority of teachers and legislators reported that students had little or no difficulties in adding, subtracting and multiplying. However, a majority in both groups believed that students had some or great difficulty in dividing and in solving problems. A majority of administrators reported that students had some or great difficulties in all five areas.

3.4 Parents and legislators were divided in their opinions of students' listening proficiency. Approximately half of the respondents in each group reported that students had some listening proficiency and half that they had very little. The majority of employers stated that students had very little listening proficiency. A preponderance of students reported that they were good listeners. A majority of the board members agreed with the students' evaluation of their listening proficiency, whereas a majority of the teachers and administrators reported that the students were not good listeners.

3.5 A majority of the parents and employers reported that students had very little speaking proficiency, whereas the majority of legislators believed that students were good speakers. Teachers, administrators, and board members had a slightly higher opinion of the students' speaking abilities than the students themselves. Only half of the students reported that they were good speakers. A majority of the teachers, administrators, and board members, however, reported that students were good speakers.

Although the students had a relatively low opinion of their speaking abilities, they consistently had a higher opinion of their abilities in reading, writing, arithmetic, and listening than the adult respondents. Indeed, the opinions of teachers, administrators, and board members varied considerably from those of the students. All of the respondents, including the students, did agree, however, that students have the most difficulties in writing. Students, teachers, and board members gave students the highest rating of proficiency in mathematics, whereas parents, employers, legislators, and administrators reported that students were most proficient in reading.

As pointed out earlier, the students seem to have an unrealistic conception of their academic abilities and achievements. It is difficult not to conclude that they may have been encouraged in these views by their teachers and by school officials. Although the majority of teachers and administrators reported that students have some or great difficulties in reading and writing, and the majority of administrators, that students have some or great difficulties in mathematics, recent reports of grade inflation suggest that students are not being informed of these problems. Until students, both in high school and in colleges, are given more realistic appraisals of their problems and potentials, these problems can or will not be remediated properly.

4. The fourth objective, to identify the key adult-functional competencies that each group considered important enough to be taught in secondary schools, was accomplished by requesting the respondents in each group to designate as "very important," "important," "somewhat important," or "not important" the 54 competencies included under the five broad areas of occupational knowledge,

government and law, health, consumer economics, and community resources.

4.1 Under the category of occupational knowledge, a majority in each group, with the exception of students and employers, designated using words properly on employment applications and on the job as a very important competency. A majority of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and board members also listed writing letters to request applications and interviews as very important. The only competency designated as very important by a majority in each group was filling out various employment forms.

A majority of students, teachers, administrators, and board members indicated that using words properly on employment applications, writing letters to request applications and interviews, filling out various employment forms, and using payroll statements to calculate wages and deductions were competencies which should be taught in school. A majority of parents, employers, and legislators also reported that these tasks should be taught in school, but indicated that the focus should be minor.

4.2 Under the category of government and law, a majority of the adult respondents designated two of the eight competencies as very important: registering to vote and following established voting procedures and understanding the restrictions and protections afforded by laws normally encountered in daily life. A majority of the students did not consider any of the competencies as very important.

None of the eight competencies were designated by a majority of students, teachers, and board members as ones which should be taught in school. A majority of administrators specified two: registering to vote and following established voting procedures and understanding the restrictions and protections afforded by the law. A preponderance of parents, employers, and legislators reported that these competencies should be included in school curriculums. A majority of the employers indicated that the focus should be major, a majority of parents, that the focus should be minor, and legislators were evenly divided.

4.3 Under the category of health, only one competency--reading and interpreting words, pictures, and diagrams that describe various areas of health--received the highest rating by any group of respondents. Students and teachers listed this competency as very important.

A majority of students, teachers, and board members indicated that selecting a balanced meal was a competency that should be taught in school. A preponderance of parents, employers, and legislators reported that the competencies included under health should be included in school curriculum but stated that the focus should be minor.

4.4 Under consumer economics, students designated four of the sixteen competencies as very important: reading and interpreting lease agreements, etc., selecting the most appropriate life insurance, selecting the most appropriate health insurance, and using the instructions that come with income tax forms to fill out tax returns. A majority of the parents and teachers specified the latter competency as very important, and a majority of the teachers also designated using samples of blank checks to fill out personal checks and reconciling check debits and credits to calculate checking account balances as very important competencies.

In no case did a majority of all respondents designate any of the sixteen competencies as ones that should be taught in school, except a majority of administrators who designated preparing budgets. Again, a preponderance of parents, employers, and legislators reported that these sixteen tasks should be included in the school curriculum, although a plurality of parents and employers stated that the focus should be minor. In contrast, a plurality of legislators reported that the focus should be major.

4.5 Under community resources, using a clock to note various times in hours, minutes and seconds with reference to day and night was designated by administrators and board members as very important. None of the other twelve competencies were designated by a majority in each group as very important.

None of the thirteen competencies were designated by a majority of students, teachers, administrators, and board members as ones that should be taught in school. A majority of parents, employers and legislators reported that these competencies should be taught in school, although each group felt that the focus should be minor.

To summarize, the twelve competencies which received the highest ratings from the respondents were:

a. filling out various employment forms, designated as very important by a majority in all populations sampled;

b. registering to vote and following established voting procedures and understanding the restrictions and protections afforded by laws normally encountered in daily life, designated as very important by a majority of the six adult populations sampled.

c. using words properly on employment applications and on the job, designated as very important by a majority of five of the populations sampled (parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and legislators) and writing letters to request applications and interviews, also designated as very important by a majority of five of the populations sampled (students, parents, teachers, administrators, and board members).

d. using the instructions that come with income tax forms to fill out tax returns, designated as very important by a majority in three of the populations sampled (students, parents, and teachers).

e. reading and interpreting words, pictures and diagrams that describe various areas of health, designated as very important in two of the populations sampled (students and teachers) and using a clock to note various times in hours, minutes, and seconds with reference to day and night, also designated as very important by a majority of two of the populations sampled (administrators and board members).

f. reading and interpreting lease agreements, contracts, etc.; selecting the most appropriate life insurance; and selecting the most appropriate health insurance, designated as very important by the students, and reconciling check debits and credits to calculate account balances and using samples of blank checks to fill out personal checks, designated as very important by the teachers.

Five of these twelve competencies were also designated as ones which should be taught in school:

a. using words properly on employment applications and on the job; writing letters to request applications and interviews; and filling out various employment forms, by a majority of students, teachers, administrators and board members;

b. registering to vote and following established voting procedures and understanding the restrictions and protections afforded by the law, by a majority of the administrators.

Three competencies which were not selected as very important by a majority in any population sampled were also designated as ones which should be taught in school;

a. using payroll statements to calculate wages and deductions, by a majority of students, teachers, administrators and board members;

b. selecting a balanced meal, by a majority of students, teachers, and board members; and

c. preparing budgets, by a majority of administrators.

Of the five competencies that received the highest rating, three were under the category of occupational knowledge: using words properly on employment applications on the job, filling out various employment forms, and writing letters to request applications and interviews. Each of these competencies involved writing, the area in which students seem to have the most difficulties. Two of the competencies were under the category of government and law: registering to vote and following established voting procedures and understanding the restrictions and protections afforded by laws normally encountered in daily life.

Although only a small number of competencies were designated as "very important" by a majority of respondents, the greatest number of competencies were considered "important" by a majority of the respondents. There were, however, nineteen competencies which were rated as "somewhat important" and "not important" by a majority in one or more of the populations sampled. They were:

a. Reading and understanding pamphlets on pest control and using menus to select various kinds of food and to calculate the total price of a meal for various numbers of people, designated as somewhat important and not important by a majority of all populations sampled;

b. Using government savings bond payment tables to determine the worth of bonds at various dates after purchase, using interest rates on city bonds to calculate amounts of interest at various dates after purchase, and writing letters requesting reservations designated as somewhat important and not important by a majority of the six adult populations sampled.

c. *Using pamphlets to determine union benefits and obligations*, designated somewhat important and not important by a majority of five of the populations sampled (teachers, administrators, board members, employers, and legislators), *using a calorie chart*, designated as somewhat important and not important by a majority of five of the populations sampled (students, parents, board members, employers, and legislators) and *reading and understanding pamphlets describing common diseases found in household pets*, also designated as somewhat important and not important by a majority of five of the populations sampled (parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and employers).

d. *Writing letters to travel agencies*, designated somewhat important and not important by a majority of four of the populations sampled (teachers, administrators, employers, and legislators).

e. *Using information gathered from the media to describe ecological problems* and *using samples of sales tags to calculate the total cost of items after sales taxes have been computed and added in*, designated somewhat important and not important by a majority of three of the populations sampled (parents, employers, and legislators), and *reading and understanding material obtained from community agencies*, also designated as somewhat important and not important by a majority of three of the populations sampled (students, administrators, and employers).

f. Writing a letter to a community agency requesting information, and using the yellow pages for travel information, designated as somewhat important and not important by a majority of two of the populations sampled (employers and legislators).

g. Making use of the information provided within consumer guides; identifying and locating sources of community information; matching the name of the agency with its services; and calculating differences in days, months, and years, designated as somewhat important and not important by employers, and matching the names of diseases with their symptoms, designated as somewhat important and not important by the legislators.

5. The fifth objective, to identify the most desirable approach for a minimum competency program, was accomplished by requesting all groups to indicate which approach they would endorse in a minimum competency program. As stated earlier, the majority of the respondents in each group indicated that they would prefer school programs which emphasized academic skills and general knowledge equally.

Parents, employers, and legislators had previously been asked whether the competencies listed under each specific knowledge area should be given a major or a minor focus in the schools. In general, these respondents indicated that the focus should be minor. However, when given a third choice, that is, giving academic skills and adult competencies an equal emphasis, the majority stated that they prefer that an equal emphasis be given to teaching academic skills and adult competencies.

Recommendations

An overwhelming majority of those surveyed for this report indicated that minimum competencies should be taught in the schools. The respondents also indicated that the teaching of minimum competencies should not take precedence over the teaching of traditional academic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but that equal emphasis should be given to both. The respondents, however, were not always in agreement as to which specific competencies should be taught. In light of these findings, the following recommendations are made.

1. ANALYZE LAWS AND POLICIES CAREFULLY BEFORE IMPLEMENTATION
   To date, many of the guidelines for implementing minimum competency laws have been vague, disjointed, overly broad, and, in some cases, call for a complete restructuring of school curriculums. In addition, the schedules for implementing competency programs and testing are, in some instances, unrealistic. Therefore, before current laws pertaining to the teaching and testing of minimum competencies are implemented, more realistic guidelines should be established.
2. Since the majority of respondents indicated that they would prefer an approach which gives equal emphasis to the teaching of minimum competencies and academic skills, minimum competency programs should be incorporated into current school curriculums.

As pointed out earlier, three of the competencies concerned with occupational knowledge that were rated as "very important" by a majority of the respondents are related to the writing process. These competencies could be taught in writing classes. Other competencies also considered "very important," such as those concerned with the benefits and obligations of citizenship, might be included in social sciences courses without extensively overhauling existing school curriculum. In effect, the teaching and testing of minimum competencies should not be regarded as a revolutionary educational movement but rather as a more effective way of teaching students the traditional academic skills that they will need to cope in an adult world.

2. PLAN PROPERLY FOR THE FUTURE

Those who feel compelled to respond to the minimum competency movement either by calling for immediate enactment of current laws or for additional laws would do well to note that effective minimum competency programs must include: (1) strong academic leadership; (2) clear statement of goals; (3) careful planning by all concerned with respect to which competencies should be taught, what standards must be applied, and how testing will be conducted; (4) gradual implementation of minimum competency curriculums; (5) proper financial and academic support; and (6) continuous research and evaluation.

3. IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

None of the above recommendations can be effectively carried out until better communication is established between those concerned about the implementation of minimum competency programs. As pointed out earlier in this report, no wide-spread agreement exists among the seven groups surveyed, either with regard to the proficiencies and problems of students or to the specific competencies which should be taught in the schools. To effect better communication among these groups and consensus regarding the selection of competencies and the development of testing programs, educators should hold hearings, forums, and conferences to acquaint various sectors of the population with the policies, issues, problems, and future direction of minimum competency programs. They should also establish working committees which include all sectors of the population when planning policies and procedures.

4. UTILIZE COMPETENCY TESTING PROPERLY

If competency tests are to help deficient students, they must be more carefully designed and given at appropriate times. More specifically, such tests must be designed in a valid and reliable way in order to identify students who have problems attaining essential learning objectives. Further, they must be given early in the student's education so that proper remediation can take place.

Carefully-designed competency tests must, of course, be intimately tied to carefully-designed competency programs. That is, students cannot be expected to do well on test items with which they have had no previous experience. Yet, at the same time, reasonable standards must be expected. Although a majority of the respondents indicated that using a clock correctly was a "very important" or "important" competency, it is not an item which should be tested for high school graduation.

The setting of standards is, or course, an ongoing affair and should be made by a panel of testing experts, educators, and community representatives who are capable of selecting those items which should be included as measures of learning. This process involves field testing and rewriting so that standards are properly set and clearly reflect the goals of the school curriculum. Striking a balance between state mandates and local control is not easy, but it can be done if consensus is reached on well defined competencies and properly designed tests that measure the acquisition of skills or competencies.

Another major problem is how the test results will be used and how the states and schools respond to these results. Even when the tests are valid and reliable, they merely describe rather than solve the student's problems. Therefore, such tests should be thought of as a primary diagnostic tool. Ultimately, problems revealed through these tests will only be resolved by properly trained teachers, aided by effective materials.

5. IMPROVE THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS

   Develop or create in-service training programs for teachers that will help them develop strategies for enhancing diagnostic/prescriptive learning. Teachers must have knowledge of the basic skills and be familiar with techniques for diagnosing and evaluating them. More specifically they must be certain they can intelligently and effectively provide instruction in the competencies selected.

6. EMPHASIZE IMPORTANCE OF REMEDIATION EFFORTS

   As pointed out in this survey, high school students obviously have problems in the basic skills, possibly because principals and teachers believe that the basic skills are really elementary subjects. This attitude must be changed and greater emphasis placed upon remediation efforts in the basic skills. Pressure from thosestates insisting on minimum competency requirements make it essential that greater attention be paid to these skills at the secondary level. In order to assist in doing this, the secondary schools should demand more funds from the giant federal compensatory education programs.

7. ENGAGE IN ONGOING RESEARCH

In working with minimum competency programs, the need for research is absolutely essential. People involved in such endeavor should do the following:

   a. Identify sources of information and assistance.
   b. Design and implement intelligent plans for accountability.
   c. Create item banks for testing purposes.
   d. Study the effect of testing on all types of students and analyze the relationship between dropout rates and minimum competency testing.
   e. Monitor progress of implementation efforts and engage in collection of longitudinal data.
   f. Disseminate and exchange information.

In short, the findings of this study indicate students have serious problems in reading, writing, mathematics, speaking, and listening; and although there was some agreement about which adult functional competencies were "very important" or "important," there was no definite agreement about which ones should be included in the school curriculum. All of which is to say that anyone working in this realm should proceed with extreme caution. Further, this study should be considered as a definite call for additional research which will foster a more intelligent dialogue among all those who advocate minimum competency programs and testing.

"ACCOUNTABILITY: THE JOB OF THE L.E.A."

Jean F. Emmons
Superintendent of Schools,
Trenton, New Jersey

Accountability and competency-based testing are becoming as one in their meaning, intent, and implementation. We are still being held accountable for the educational lives of our boys and girls, but now the larger community has psychologically joined the concepts of competency-based testing and global learning. The community continues to be told by public school educators and the media that our students are not learning for a variety of socio-economic, personal reasons. Therefore, our accepted measuring devices are not reporting favorably data relating to those academic areas being tested.

Increasing public pressure, as evidenced through legislation and grassroots parental involvement, reflects widespread discontent with the product. Educators are now being challenged to do a better job. The educational establishment is now being held accountable for a test score as evidence of effectiveness.

Urban centers have received tremendous criticism concerning test results. Within all schools, the educational standard of excellence is the test score rather than a composite of measures to identify levels of academic functioning. The development of our accountability model moved from personalized classroom testing to depersonalized norm-referenced to criterion-referenced to a highly depersonalized competency-based testing format. Underlying this sequence of events is the implicit belief held by some that all learning is divisible into numerous, discrete subskills and that these can be accurately divided and measured by a paper and pencil test. However, though there is substantial agreement in the skills area, there is substantial disagreement in the knowledge area. All learning cannot be readily assessed by the present framework of test sophistication. If that level of sophistication did exist, there would be concomitant differences vis-a-vis the communities. The urban centers would suffer under handicaps not experienced by our rural/suburban brothers and sisters, or conversely so.

Although the problems relating to accountability and competency-based testing in urban centers are legion and may vary from city to city and from region to region, we have attempted to list and discuss some of the more universal implementation problems faced by the LEA. Many of these dilemmas of accountability/competency-based testing are not unique to our times. They have been with us for the better part of the 20th century and were found to be generally unsolvable by our pedecessors. Unaware of the complexity of the situation, the public is seeking quick and easy redress of problems which may be beyond our control (or theirs).

We have, in this paper, set about to discuss those problems which would impede the development of a system of accountability/competency-based testing with the urban communities.

In order to determine levels of accountability, the LEA must clearly identify what it is capable of accomplishing within the framework of societal, political, and fiscal constraints. In addition, we, as educators, must specify those goals which cannot be attained, and we must make them known to the community so that we can no longer be held accountable for that which we cannot control.

The era of competency-based testing has arrived, and we, as educators, have only served to hasten its entrance onto center stage. Until the late 1950's, educators made promises based upon what they knew they could deliver. These mutually agreed upon contracts between educators and the community were, in the main, kept. In the eyes of our clients, we promised and we delivered.

But with the 1960's came an increased drive for social change. The larger society agreed that change was beneficial and right. Both the politicians and social scientists appointed education as their change agent. Educators readily accepted this new set of responsibilities. We enlarged our scope and pushed back the borders. In the process, education significantly increased the levels of opportunity to members of our population that, heretofore, had been denied the benefits of an academic experience. We extended the role of the institution. Social/health services became an accepted responsibility, and we entered into a nutritional program which fed millions of youngsters who needed an improved diet.

In our zest to meet the goals of the "Great Society," we promised to elevate the educational standards of our society. Educators went to the public and asked for its financial and spiritual support, and promised that, if this support were given, the goals would be attained. Local, state, and federal governments gave much of the financial support requested.

The profession gave verbal assurance that the "new" programs were making a difference and that the monies were being spent wisely. Parents did not understand why Johnny could not read when the report card said he could. As additional questions arose about processes and outcomes, we moved into other reportable methods. Education began to rely heavily upon norm-referenced tests as a means to assure parents that goals were being accomplished. But the tests did not report the kind of data that we had anticipated. Because the expanded population was not benefitting from our instructional programs in a way which was measurable by norm-referenced instruments, education turned to a new measurement device founded upon a criterion-referenced format, called a competency-based test.

In order to determine if the schools have been doing their jobs, states such as New Jersey have developed standardized tests which are designed to measure individual and/or group educational growth.

The creators of these tests have organized the instruments in a fashion which is intended to measure a set of specific skills. They contend, by inference, that if pupils know and master the skills which are tested, education will have succeeded in its mandated task. It will have produced a literate population.

Most competency-based tests have criterion-referenced as well as norm-referenced characteristics. The New Jersey Minimum Basic Skills Test purports to measure how well a group or individual has mastered a list of objectives which are related to a specific curriculum. When it evaluates the skills of a district and compares the district's skills to how well other youngsters have mastered the same skills throughout the state, it acts as a norm-referenced test. When it attempts to measure a single youngster's mastery of the tested skills, it purports to be a criterion-referenced test. A criterion-referenced approach will identify a student's mastery of a set of specific objectives and also provide information which will enable the teacher to reinforce, remediate, and/or supplement the skills under consideration. The design of the criterion-referenced test provides evaluation relevant to classroom instruction. It identifies for the student the objectives he has mastered and the objectives needed for review while encouraging practical classroom instruction in a prescriptive manner.

If a competency-based test is created and thereafter administered to a group of pupils, we have accepted the hypothesis that it can accurately measure and report those skills contained in a specific discipline.

Once the concept of minimum competency has been accepted administratively in a district, it becomes the responsibility of administration, teachers, and boards of education to identify the subject matter which they wish to evaluate. After the general categories have been specified, the task now will center upon determining the skills which are required in order to attain mastery of the subject matter. After the district has identified these sub-skills, administrators and teachers must administer a test which will be able to evaluate district and/or individual student strengths and weaknesses.

The district now has completed the basic elements of needs assessment on a district-wide, as well as a student-wide, basis, which should give direction to developing and implementing relevant materials, instructional strategies, and other related curricular activities.

The aforementioned factors can be controlled and implemented by administration. There are, however, other conditions which are influenced by the community, teachers, pupils, and governmental agencies. Districts that have attempted to administer competency-based testing programs have run into a number of severe implementation roadblocks which emanate from the aforementioned pressure groups.

The urban school districts have a constituency which is varied. Its population ranges from the rich to the poor, from white to black, from immigrant to pilgrim founding fathers, from nihilists to conservatives, and from young to old. In addition, the problem becomes compounded when we add the influence to local, state, and federal governments, as well as the powerful parent, pupil, and teacher lobbies. These are some of the forces which have confounded the urban school districts' attempts to implement an evaluation system based on minimum competency-based testing.

Let us take a look at how these pressure groups impede the implementation of competency-based tests within the urban education setting.

A. FUNDING - LOCAL, STATE, FEDERAL AGENCIES

Urban educational and community leaders have traditionally been the staunchest advocates of accountability/competency-based testing. But within the recent past, they have seen a consistent and systematic erosion of their funding levels from the state and federal governments. During a time when state and federal agencies are demanding improved results from local school districts, urban centers have lost their ability to generate the necessary revenues to maintain, much less improve, their instructional delivery systems. In addition, the suburban and rural communities have gained control of the legislative bodies in most states with large urban centers. The end result has been an unfair distribution of resources. The rich suburban and rural communities have been getting richer while the urban educational systems have been sinking deeper into despair.

Local urban governments have seen a severe decline in property values and revenues which are based upon property values. Their ability to support their school systems has declined in a direct proportion to the decline of their ratables. As a result, state and federal governments have directed increased financial support to urban educational systems.

Local governments have given up any pretense of supporting their school systems through local taxation. Many urban systems receive as much as 80% of their revenues from state and federal agencies. Along with the financial support, the cities have given up local control to these agencies. Urban centers must now meet the needs and demands of the state and federal governments, but the educational goals of these agencies may not reflect the goals of the community.

Test results have revealed serious instructional deficiencies within urban education. The state and federal governments have demanded from urban systems that programs be established which are designed to correct the identified weaknesses. But these programs are usually labor intensive and cost a great deal of money in amounts which would exhaust their resources. The state and federal agencies, which are controlled by rural/suburban politicians, have been reluctant or unwilling to provide additional funds needed to implement improved instructional delivery systems.

The funding agencies must reconsider their assistance formulas and provide increased revenues to those areas which are most in need. Without additional support, cities will not be able to staff their ranks with the best and the brightest administrators and teachers who are prerequisites to implementing a program designed to meet the needs of inner-city students.

B. BOARDS OF EDUCATION

As resource levels shrink, the struggle for control and distribution of jobs intensifies at the board level. Urban boards of education have become a major source of patronage. As a result of their desire to control the distribution of jobs, boards of education have taken ultimate control of the system out of the hands of administration. If administration cannot hire and fire, it cannot lead. If it cannot lead, it cannot be held accountable. Urban administrators have become expert fire fighters who smother the flames of one crisis only to have to put out another. They have become crisis managers.

In addition, board members have little understanding of the instructional delivery systems that are required in order to implement the improved program designs demanded by state and community leaders. They view outside interference as a direct threat to local autonomy. They are resistant to change which may eventually result in additional financial expenditures. Board members have come to understand that in order to implement a complete competency-based testing program, the district will have to purchase additional materials, provide in-service programs, and revise its curriculum. All of these are significant cost items.

C. FIELD STAFF (ADMINISTRATION)

Building-level administrators have a tendency to be resistant to change. Change can be disruptive. Their initial inclination is to maintain organized instructional systems that are an accepted reality within their individual schools. These administrators are the implementers, not the creators. If they view change as a threat to the order of things, they might resist and could possibly disrupt programmatic changes resulting from a minimum-competency testing program.

D. TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS

One of the problems we are faced with is a population of teachers who may fall into two broad categories that we could refer to as age/value orientation.

Older teachers who are locked into the system usually have had intense levels of training. They possessed intense levels of commitment and looked upon education as a point of goal attainment rather than a path of escape. They were willing to put in enormous amounts of time beyond the limits of the working day. This group has witnessed a decline in commitment from the community, board of education, central administration, field administration, as well as students, and as a result, has entered into a period of frustration. These individuals have withdrawn emotionally from the instructional process. They put in their time and turn in their lesson plans. Devotion to and pride in the profession which they worked so hard to attain have been lost, perhaps, forever. Many believe that the situation is hopeless and that they are helpless. From this background, we bring into the operational setting a new set of instructional materials and concepts that are said to be designed to regain control of the educational process.

It has been discovered that reorienting this group of teachers may be an impossible task. We may have waited too long. These teachers have the support of tenure, unions, and governmental agencies in addition to quasijudicial bodies such as PERC. These concepts and organizations are powerful forces and are all designed to protect the "rights" of teachers.

On the flip side of the coin, we have the "new teacher" who has been produced in the last fifteen years. This teacher views the profession not as a point of accomplishment, but as a way out of a social/economic class. This individual uses the profession as a pathway to other goals and as a means to sustain himself in the interim. The teacher in this category does as little planning as possible. He may spend enormous amounts of time engaging in irrelevant activities during instructional time, and his working day ends with the dismissal bell. Although the teachers described herein are not representative of the total group of dedicated and loyal professionals working in the inner-city schools, their numbers are large enough to be a disruptive influence. Most teachers want to do a good job, but they see some of their fellow "professionals" performing at a less than satisfactory level and being paid at the same rate and enjoying identical rights and privileges as the total group.

These has been a dramatic drop in morale among those teachers who have toiled relentlessly to improve the educational programs of urban youngsters.

E. UNIONS

The struggle for money has resulted in more aggressive teacher organizations. When it became apparent to administration and to the local boards of education that they could not meet the financial demands of unions because of restrictive budgets, they negotiated away, in lieu of financial concessions, administrative rights that once were considered exclusively within the domain of management. Clauses relating to teacher transfers, hiring/firing processes, and evaluations have become a part of most teacher contracts.

A long succession of favorable contracts has welded teacher groups into a powerful political force. They now have the ability to delay or terminate any new concept or process which is viewed as threatening to the membership. Teachers believe that competency-based tests will be used to evaluate teacher, as well as student, performance. Many urban professional organizations now stand in opposition to this concept. If their position is not altered, they can and will delay or destroy effective implementation of competency-based tests.

F. PARENTAL/COMMUNITY CONCERNS

The community has been informed that competency-based tests may be used to set levels of competency for the purpose of determining graduation eligibility. They are fearful that these instruments will be utilized as a sorting process rather than as an incentive to encourage pupils to master life-related skills. Who will set the standards for graduation? Will it involve members of the community and reflect their standards and goals, or will it be developed by a group of educators who have little understanding of the dreams and aspirations of an inner-city population?

Who will set "the" standard for graduation? If the requirements for passing this test are set too high, it will surely result in the failure of a significant portion of the pupil population. Failure may lead to an accelerated dropout rate. Since graduation has become a symbol of achievement, failure can lead only to frustration and to a loss of self-esteem. In addition, a high school diploma has become the "ticket" to acquiring a job. Community leaders view competency-based tests as another means of denying urban young adults the opportunity to work. Why is the educational establishment reconsidering graduation standards during a time when minority groups are gaining a foothold in the job market? Minority groups have always used education as their way out of poverty. If the diploma is withheld, the job can be denied. The end result will be a drastic increase in the numbers of undereducated and underemployed inner-city adults. I do not need to discuss the potentially explosive societal implications contained in a population who has been denied access to the American Dream.

G. IMPLEMENTATION AT THE CLASSROOM LEVEL

Teachers have discovered that competency-based tests administered on a grade-level basis have little value to their instructional programs. Tests, such as the New Jersey Minimum Basic Skills Test, which purport to measure minimum competencies, are usually administered to youngsters within a specific grade level. Little or no consideration is given to the student who cannot read the test. If we have a group of youngsters who are sitting in a sixth-grade classroom and are reading at the fourth level, what information will be derived from an administered test normed at the sixth-grade level?

We can only conclude that they cannot read sixth-grade material. But, you see, Miss Jones, their sixth-grade teacher, could have given us the same information.

If I asked you to lift a one-thousand (1,000) pound weight, you would fail. I will have discovered that you could not lift one-thousand (1,000) pounds - not what your true lifting capabilities are.

Teachers know that they need reliable data which will help them design individual and group instructional programs based upon the skill strengths and weaknesses of pupils. In order to accomplish this task, we must move away from the concept of administering norm-criterion referenced tests on a grade-level basis. If education is now concerning itself with organizing and implementing programs based upon pupil needs, then, we must consider the concept of functional level testing.

How will these data be used? Will teachers utilize the results derived from competency-based tests to create individual/group student improvement plans or will they "file it and forget it?" Will the district provide the training programs designed to teach professionals how to translate these data into definable instructional strategies? Can and/or will the district help teachers reorganize their material resources in a manner which will give greater direction and emphasis to the improved instructional strategies? If there is a negative response to any of these elemental questions, then the meaning and intent of competency-based tests have been lost at the point of delivery.

H. STUDENTS

We are a society that has attempted to meet the educational needs of all youngsters whether they be handicapped, rich or poor, or from varying cultural and ethnic groups. Statistics indicate we are meeting the goal of universal education for our youngsters. Studies have shown that in 1900, only about 6% of our boys and girls finished high school, while today 80% meet this criterion. The intent of competency-based tests is to identify the specific needs of youngsters regardless of socio-economic, intellectual, and cultural differences. But to make a judgment or comparison of youngsters based upon a single test is, at best, questionable and, at worst, unethical and pedagogically unsound.

Students may bring with them a rich and varied cultural background which is not easily measured by normed-criterion-referenced instruments. Indeed, students may have mastery of a given discipline, but because they are not proficient in the dominant language or dialect, they will not be able to demonstrate their true levels of proficiency.

In addition, urban youngsters are not test oriented. They have not been made aware of the critical importance of tests in our society and have not been taught proper test-taking techniques. This lack of concern for the value of tests has resulted in a depression in urban test results.

As we know, urban school systems have had a nagging and persistent problem with discipline. When teachers are attempting to discipline, they are not teaching. The amount of time spent "on task" has decreased in direct proportion to the time teachers have to spend on discipline problems. It is no wonder that studies have shown a high correlation between student achievement and time "on task" in the classroom.

I. TEST LIMITATIONS

When we accept and administer competency-based tests, we have accepted the hypothesis that these tests can measure accurately what they say they can measure. In addition, we must accept the premise that minimum competencies can be identified. There are serious questions relating to both problems. When we administer competency-based tests on a grade-level basis, are we evaluating whether a youngster can read on that level, or are we evaluating the skill mastery at that level? If competency-based tests evaluate skill mastery, how can we evaluate the skills of a sixth-grade youngster who is reading at a third-grade level? All that we probably have discovered about this youngster is that he is not able to process data at the sixth-grade level. This is not sufficient information to help us design instructional programs of a remedial-corrective nature.

I do not need to discuss the problems of test-phobic youngsters, as well as students who have not attained a command of the dominant language or dialect. There are numerous factors which affect a test score besides intelligence and command of the subject matter.

The question of whether competency-based tests can measure minimum competency has not been fully answered by the test creator. But it appears that the present state of the art is not capable of measuring the educational expectations and aspirations reflected in most state legislation. For most disciplines, the problem of determining and setting minimum standards is an almost impossible task. It is difficult at best to get a group of English teachers to agree upon what skills are required in order to be a literate citizen. If we cannot get the experts to agree upon what is basic to learning, the problem then moves into the field of politics. It may be politically explosive to set standards which are too high. If it is difficult to decide upon what is educationally sound, then the politicians will tell us what is politically expeditious. The higher we go on the educational ladder, the more we move into political rather than educational decisions. It may be impossible to get a consensus of minimum competencies at the secondary level in order to determine graduation standards in all disciplines, with the possible exceptions of reading and mathematics. And even in these areas, the state legislatures will be the final decision makers concerning graduation standards and minimum competencies.

CONCLUSION

Our test-conscious society has forced the educational establishment into evaluating its processes and outcomes based upon test results. I fear that test results have become the goal of education. If educators are going to be evaluated on how well their clients score on a given test, the goal will be to teach to the test rather than to the global needs of youngsters. The curriculum will be redesigned to meet the needs of "the test," and materials will be purchased to meet the needs of the revised curriculum.

There is a significant defect in this sequence of events. The needs of our pupil population may not be revealed in the results and conclusions drawn by the test makers and administrators. We will be teaching youngsters to pass a test, and the content of the test may have little relationship to educational processes which make an ethical, functional, knowledgeable, and contributing citizen. The test makers are molding our curriculum and are guiding our instructional activities. Our worst nightmares may be coming true - the testing tail is wagging the curriculum dog.

The LEA, in its effort to be accountable to its client population, may have to re-examine its position with respect to testing/evaluation and those mental processes which are not easily measured.

Finally, we need to balance the use of objective tests, such as criterion-referenced/competency-based testing, and the subjective observational techniques used by professional staff. When the futures of boys and girls are at stake, we, as professionals, must not allow depersonalized devices to become our masters. They are merely a decision-making tool - not the answer to the dilemma.

TEXTS OF COMMENTS BY U.S. REPRESENTATIVE

WILLIAM H. GRAY, III

at the
Minimum Competency Conference
Sheraton Hotel on October 18, 1979
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you this morning.

I'm especially grateful to your chairperson and my good friend, Marciene Mattelman, for the invitation to take part in this symposium.

I had hoped to be able to spend the entire morning with you. But, in the time I do have, let me outline a few of the concerns I have on the question of minimum competency testing -- concerns I have not only as a legislator, but as a former educator, myself.

Minimum competency programs have certainly gained popularity in recent years.

Some 37 states now have some form of mandatory testing. At the same time, persons who advocate the educational interests of racial and language minority students have recognized that there is a difference of opinion as to whether these programs benefit -- or harm -- minority children.

On the one hand, I know that all of us recognize that too many minority children have been -- and continue to be -- victims of educational neglect.

We also understand that because certain competencies are important to employability and advancement, minority children will benefit if they are taught those competencies.

On the other hand, we know from experience that the gap between the proclaimed benefits of an educational policy and the reality of practices at the classroom level often works to the detriment of minority children.

For example, programs for handicapped students are necessary.

But, culturally different children continue to be disproportionately placed in certain programs for handicapped students.

Testing programs are important.

But, too many minority children have been labeled, tracked and inappropriately taught because of test misuse.

The experiences of those who work with minority children have taught them that allegedly beneficial which arise from oversight, poor management, ignorance, insensitivity, incompetence, lethargy, discrimination, racism, or merely good intentions gone awry.

I am not suggesting that a good program which is conceptually sound should be abandoned simply because it is subject to human inadequacy or bad faith.

But, I am saying that when experiences shows that certain groups of children have the most to risk, then it is important that programs be designed and carried out so as to assure that the educational interests of those children are at least protected -- if not advanced.

In Washington, we have seen the introduction of legislation dealing with the question of standardised testing.

In particular, my colleague from New York, Congressman Ted Weiss, has introduced a bill to regulate the testing industry, and to require certain disclosures of scores, comparative ratings, etc. Just this past Tuesday, Weiss withdrew the bill from markup when it became apparent he lacked the votes. He will bring it back next year.

But, in the 96th Congress so far, we have yet to see any legislation dealing with the issue of minimum competency.

Within this setting, I'd like to highlight some of the concerns I have, particularly as to the impact of mandatory testing on minority students, and the role of the federal government in this issue.

I would suggest, first, that we can point to a set of protective standards by which minimum competency programs can and should be judged:

- First, minimum competency programs should not penalize minority students. I am referring to the non-promotion, non-graduation, awarding of a simple certificate of attendance, or denial of a regular diploma when a student's failure to meet required performance standards can be attributed to such factors as:

A. A school system's failure to provide equal educational opportunities in the years prior to the start of a competency program;

B. A school system's practice of routinely passing students from grade to grade without first assuring that they have mastered essential basic skills;

C. A school system's failure to provide students or their parents with adequate notice that they would be held accountable for meeting certain performance standards;

D. A school system's failure to teach the specific skills required to meet the performance standards mandated by the competency program; and,

E. The failure of a school system to provide students who have previously not met the competency standards with the type of instruction necessary to assist them in meeting competency requirements.

- Secondly, minimum competency programs should not utilize tests which assess a student's racial, class, cultural, or family language background rather than his or her ability to demonstrate a mastery of skills which have been taught as part of the school curriculum.

- Thirdly, a minority student's failure to meet minimum competency standards should not lead to grouping practices for corrective instruction -- if that grouping results in separate classes identifiable by race or language.

- Fourth, educators should be trained to determine a student's competencies in relation to specific objective criteria. Performance standards which require educators to make subjective judgments about a student's competencies should not be used.

- Fifth, minimum competency programs should not require a student to meet performance standards for particular grade levels when a student has not previously been enrolled in that school system.

- Sixth, state governments and local school districts should make available the funds necessary to provide appropriate and effective supplementary instruction to enable students who do not meet certain performance standards to master the required competencies.

- And Seventh, minimum competency tests should meet the standards of major professional organizations regarding test construction, administration, and interpretation.

While these seven standards may provide a minimal protection for the educational interests of minority students, there is another set of protective standards which all of us must address.

During the past 15 years, the federal government has assumed a major role in advancing and protecting the educational rights of racial and language minorities, citizens with handicaps and women.

These groups have benefited from the federal government's regulatory and enforcement authority as a result of such laws as the 1964 Civil Rights Act; the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended, the 1972 Education Amendments; and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Groups of people covered by these laws are often referred to as "protected classes."

The emergence of minimum competency programs for students in two-thirds of the states throughout the nation has occurred as a result of local initiative, undirected and largely uninfluenced by laws. However, because the federal government has become, to a large extent, the guardian of the educational interests of certain protected classes, the government does have a critical role to play in assuring that minimum competency programs do not discriminate against these groups.

I would like, then, to first examine how two federal agencies responsible for protecting and expanding the educational interests of certain protected classes have addressed the minimum competency issue. Then, I would like to illustrate the relation between (a) selected federal education policies, laws and regulations, and (b) the possible effects of state and locally mandated competency programs on certain protected classes of students.

The Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is the agency charged with enforcing several civil rights laws as they relate to programs administered by HEW.

One of the most important laws the Office is charged with enforcing is Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. That Title provides:

> No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, nor national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

The OCR has also taken enforcement action on the basis of regulations issued under Title VI -- on the basis of regulations for the 1972 Emergency School Aid Act, which provides financial assistance to local districts to assist them with school desegregation.

In 1977, the Office began to enforce regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974, a law which requires the elimination of discrimination on the basis of handicap in any program or activity receiving federal funds.

To my knowledge, the OCR has received only one complaint specifically related to the possible discriminatory effects of a minimum competency program. In January, 1979, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund submitted a complaint on behalf of "Aspira" of New York alleging that the proposed New York competency test would discriminate against language minority children. By late April the OCR had reached no decision concerning the complaint perhaps because the agency has no policy regarding the effects of competency programs.

There is also now action litigation on behalf of Black students in Florida and North Carolina challenging those states' competency programs on the grounds they are racially discriminatory. These legal actions emphasize the need for the office to develop policies which will clarify the application of certain federal civil rights laws and regulations to minimum competency programs.

These racially isolated classes would be discriminatory under the provisions of the emergency school aid act regulations, unless school officials can demonstrate that they represent "bona fide ability grouping."

Besides the Office of Civil Rights, any discussion of minimum competency must examine the Division of Education for the disadvantaged. This is part of the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education of the United States Office of Education.

Though it is a relatively small office, it has the responsibility for administering one of the largest federal aid-to-education programs--Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Under Title I, the Federal government provides more than $3.5 billion to state and local school systems to meet the special needs of about 6.5 million educationally disadvantaged children.

Though the program is widely perceived as addressing the needs of poor and minority children, neither poverty nor race is a criterion for participation in the program. Students in schools with the most poor children are selected to participate in the program based on their educational needs. Because there is high correlation between the factors of race, poverty, and education achievement, in those parts of the nation with large minority group populations, many of the children who receive Title I services are minority students from low-income families.

Nationwide, about 34 percent of the children participating in Title I funded programs are black, and about 10 percent are Spanish surnamed.

The possible conflicts between Title I and minimum competency programs must be understood within the context of Title I laws and regulations. Title I provides funds so schools can underwrite the cost for extra programs and services for educationally disadvantaged children who are most in need.

Schools cannot use Title I funds to "supplant" state and local funds normally used to pay for regular educational programs and services.

Children participating in Title I funded programs are supposed to receive all of that which other children receive as part of the regular school program--and they receive supplemental assistance paid for with Title I funds. Even though many children in a school may be in educational need, there is not enough Title I money to provide extra programs and services for all children eligible to receive Title I assistance. Therefore, Title I regulations include a concentration of services requirement which mandates that students most in need participate in Title I funded programs.

Regulations also require school districts to determine the educational needs of Title I eligible children based on an annual needs assessment.

The potential for abuse of Title I funds in relation to minimum competency programs is important to the educational interests of minority children. If Title I funds are used in ways that violate Title I laws and regulations, there will be less funds available for programs for Title I eligible minority children most in need. Because Title I is regarded by many people as a remedial program, and because many minimum competency programs require remediation after students' basic skill deficiencies are identified, the use of Title I funds may be seen by some school officials as a way to underwrite the cost of such remediation.

I have tried to provide two examples of federal agencies which administer laws basic to the protection and advancement of the educational interests of minority children.

Because certain provisions of these laws can be construed as protective standards, they may provide the major potential for enforceable safeguards which can protect the educational interests of minority students participating in minimum competency programs.

However, if that potential is to be realized, federal agencies with appropriate jurisdictions must take greater initiatives to examine how the laws and regulations which they administer relate to minimum competency programs.

You, as scholars, researchers, and policy analysts can play a valuable role in bringing clarity to this issue.

You can study specific federal agencies which administer education programs or enforce laws related to education programs.

You can also look at how the laws under the jurisdiction of those agencies may relate to current or future consequences of minimum competency programs.

As a result of your studies, they can determine whether those federal agencies should devote more attention to the minimum competency issue.

Particular attention needs to be given to such agencies as the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, the Office of Bilingual Education, and the Office of Indian Education.

Problems of Implementation of Minimum Competency Requirements

Luis Mercado

Principal, P.S. 75

New York City

Minimum competency testing creates many problems as well as solutions for the principal. At our school I am interested in assessing children's true capabilities. Children, teachers and parents respond to learning. Children demonstrate their learning to themselves and to others. We are now learning and responding to minimum competency, a state-wide and nation-wide testing movement that mirrors disenchantment with public education.

New York State's Department of Education conceives the testing mission as an opportunity to transform the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. New York State sets minimum standards for a high school diploma, identifies students in need of remedial help and draws attention to the whole reading, mathematics and writing process. New York State's program adopted July 1, 1978 and effective June 1981, has as its purpose, the improvement of all students' basic skills. This includes all students achieving above minimum competency standards.

At our New York City west side Public School 75 (elementary) in the boro of Manhattan, we are mandated to give between October 3 and October 15, 1979, the Pupil Evaluation Program (P.C.P.) tests in reading and mathematics in grades 3 and 6. Junior HIgh, Intermediate Schools and High Schools give tests in reading and writing in grades 11 and 12. Mathematics testing is done after students complete the required High School course in mathematics. The High School diploma beginning on June 1, 1981, will be given to students obtaining passing marks on regents competency tests or on the regents High School examinations in English and mathematics.

Minimal competency testing legislation has been adopted by thirty-six states. Many of the state systems have legal problems. The constitutionality of the tests are being challenged. In Florida, the court case indicates that sorting out by race, the tests interaction to curriculum and teaching to the tests are the main issues. The legal ruling, subject to appeal, is that the tests can not be used for four years to deny diplomas. This decision was based on the consideration of the impact of segregated schools in students education experiences. In South Carolina, the minimum competency process is being started by giving tests before the first grade. Children who do not pass the tests are not promoted to the first grade. South Carolina's experimental pilot test results had a 50% failure rate for black children. The state has identified minority students as incompetent at a higher numerical level than whites. I would guess that South Carolina can be charged with discriminatory testing.

New York State claims a differenct approach. New York State has stated for instance, that its preliminary competency tests in writing is "in a sense not just a test; it is rather one phase in a comprehensive program for developing writing skills." The Regents Degrees of Reading Power, (D.R.P.) competency test in reading, intends to measure reading comprehension within individual sentences and the ability to derive meaning from prose text with many sentences. The D.R.P. measures the student's ability to understand written material.

It uses the idea of readability based on measurable properties of prose, such as length of sentences and common word frequency.

The D.R.P. uses the Bormuth formula to rank reading passages. Students are defined as understanding a passage if they are able to destore deleted words. Five answer choices are provided for each deleted word.

The Rausch scoring model makes for easy scoring of the D.R.P. This becomes counting of the number of right answers. Then the teacher can easily determine by refering to a conversion chart, the childs comprehension level in a reading textbook (50% texts analyzed.)

Some other factors besides readability need to be considered by teachers and principals in the selection of textbooks. These factors include accuracy of content, appropriateness to the child's developmental age and non-discriminating portrayals of ethnic, religious and racial groups.

The comprehension level information is shown on three levels. The frustration level is the point where 50% is comprehended. The instructional level, the range in which 75% of the material is understood and the independent level where the students comprehend 90% of the material. The D.R.P. claims to measure what it claims to measure, passage difficulty. This factor is considered to be accountable for scoring differences. The test characteristics are:

a. Passages Increase in Difficulty
b. Items Text Dependent
c. Information In Text
d. Does Not Measure Sub-Skills
e. Sensitive To Gain
f. Predicts Information Acquisition
g. Can Be Criterion Referenced

I do believe and research shows, that a good match of reading materials with student abilities enables increases in comprehension. This information can be a means in developing an instructional program bt our schools. We at least can determine if comprehension is helped by this D.R.P. process. I'm uneasy about the emphasis placed on materials. Materials don't teach. Teachers do. Therefore, our ability to be trained in the use of the State Education Departments (S.E.P.) experimental "Comprehension Through Active Processing, A Set of Interactive Instructional Models" is important for developing a systematic program of comprehension. I believe that D.R.P. can be used to measure children's relationships to their school environment. Scores can be plotted on a curve over a period of time for each student. A continuing low item score reflects a long term negative relationship with the school. What is it due to? How do we work with the child? How do we represent the child's true potential?

We can develop in-service courses, teachers and parents training and model programs based on S.E.D.'s concept of reading. This concept is based on recent research on comprehension incorporating the psycholinguistic approach.

1. Reading is meaning centered.
2. Reading is a language process.
3. Reading is using appropriate strategies. (materials don't teach)
4. Reading must be taught by analogy and example.
    - 4.1 sampling
    - 4.1 predicting

    4.3 confirming
    4.4 condensing

5. Reading is the organization of information. (Ideas and concepts, in order to be used and retrieved must go into long term memory banks) Special emphasis is on sorting and categorization of information.
6. Reading comprehension must be taught and students required to:
    - 6.1 Use context for prediction of meaning
    - 6.2 Sub-skills applied to lengthier reading materials
    - 6.3 Discover logical relationships in reading materials
    - 6.4 Change meanings in their own language enabling communication to other people.

All tests, including those of minimum competency, select specific content within a subject matter. What is the most important content to sample? This is an unanswered question. The S.E.P. Mathematics High School Competency Test is a calculation score. This type of skill is not as important as other aspects of mathematics. Passing this test is relatively unimportant for assessment of a students mathematics ability. Mathematics tests are reading tests. A low score can mean low test achievement or poor reading. The mathematics high school test does not have a time limit. This is excellent. On the other hand, this type of test does not allow for individuality. Also, there is no credit for partial understanding of test items.

What are some practical problems that I must deal with in our school? Thomas Murphy of Holt Rhinehart and Winston said, "Teach the skill that's the new old time religion. But this makes me uncomfortable. Reading is more than skill acquisition. It is an art form. You can cripple children by not giving them enough literacy." Publishers are designing standardized tests. Is the main purpose of reading to get the right answers on multiple-choice tests? Standardized tests are not useful for diagnosis. Coaching and rote practice activities could very well be parents', teachers' and children's main preoccupation. Do poor test results mean that a child who is reading cannot read? Are some of our reading failures due to the testing process? As we explore the testing area we observe children making errors because they have never learned certain information. Children are penalized because of a lack of knowledge. The test developers' assumptions of common cultural knowledge creates culturally biased tests.

I would like to see the social inquiry case study method used at our school to test children's literacy. Robert Stake indicates that the case study approach is in harmony with aims of understanding, extension of experience and conviction of what is known.

I would give children a choice of reading materials. I would interview them using a case study approach. We would be able to determine the child's comprehension of printed material, and oral reading ability. The case study approach is holistic and difficult to understand. The facts are made of interrelated variables. The information is gathered by personal observation.

The case study is reported in a literature narrative form. The main focus is understanding the individual case.

I would like to have people who are involved in the testing write the tests. Teachers, local test specialists, principals, children and parents could participate in test construction. We would decide what is the material to be learned, and how and why it is important. What are our goals? What is it that will be useful to us after finishing the course? In any event I would not use multiple-choice questions because I want to test understanding and comprehension.

I believe that our tests could then be related to actual learning goals. Teachers will be trained in the processes of making tests and evaluating learning activities. To involve students in composing questions would enable them to better understand what they have learned. This type of criterion-referenced meaningful testing is what I am experimenting with as site director at P.S. 75 (Manhattan) of Broad Jump, a tutorial remedial program based on self-image and motivational acitvities incorporating the arts in reading and math instructional processes.

Barbara Di Novo, visual arts teacher in Broad Jump's summer program at P.S. 75 shared with me her thoughts on the only test she remembered from her schooling. This involved the type of active learning that I have in mind. "The only exam I remember in 12 years of post-high school education was the final exam during my sophomore year on 17th century poetry. The professor instructed us to write the preface and table of contents for a book on five 17th century poets, selecting the best or most representative poets and their five best or most representative poems.

This is the only test I remember that asked me to discriminate, to evaluate and to compare based on a personally developed criterion."

Mager indicates that acquiring skills is not usually a sufficient goal in cognitive-oriented learning experiences. I would like to see more mastery experiences defined as the utilization of those acquired skills. Barbara Di Novo's experience on this one test does reflect the premise that there are basic mental activities underlying her performance. These activities were taught and then tested. I say that these were mastery experiences utilizing acquired skills remembered by students and a credit to the criterion reference type teacher made test.

Criterion-referenced or objective testing required full involvement of teachers in selecting and developing objectives. Goals have to be agreed on. What goals are not being accomplished after we've tested children? How do we get students to succeed in achieving missed objectives? I prefer to have our school begin to consider this problem not as remediation, but as involving a re-thinking of high-order reasoncng and comprehension. How do we systematically think? Whimby describes approaches for teachers that develop problem-solving skills. These approaches are based on the premise that there are basic mental activities underlying performance and which can be taught.

The system used is thinking out loud as both teacher and student work through ideas, analyze relationships, separate concepts and generalize. If I applied this thinking to my summer activities at P.S. 75 of directing a remediation program for 90 youngsters, then our follow-up school year program for this population could involve the development of criterion reference tests. I would involve the teachers, parents, students and administrators in a dialogue establishing instructional objectives. I'd need technical assistance from evaluation specialists on test-item development. I'd ensure that our objectives are consistent with district and state goals for education. I'd think through some possible educational outcomes based on long-range goals for each student. These would require a broad range of test formats. I would not use multiple-choice or true/false questions.

But in any event I'd use a variety of criteria for evaluating our students' learning development. I do realize that I must be careful about the selection process for objectives. The complexity of developing objectives needs the development of leadership team approaches and has to be more difficult. The pay-off for everyone is the improved diagnosis of individual learning problems and the prescription of systematic approaches to strengthen the learning situation.

I want our students to be judged on their individual performances. I want our criterion referenced tests to reflect instructional objectives. In development of criterion referenced tests, I'd like to correct for cultural and socio-economic bias. I'd like to emphasize that student tests should not be used for teacher evaluations. This destroys our trust relationships. It demonstrates a lack of understanding of what tests do measure. Tests of any type are problems that reflect only a small part of student learning or a teacher effectiveness in the classroom.

I believe that criterion-referenced tests where the student is evaluated as to the achievement of goals avoids some of the problems of standardized norm testing. The refinement of structured materials in programmed materials leads to frequent testing. The danger is that shorter and shorter test intervals pushes out teaching. We can end up right where we started, teaching to the tests. Another serious problem in criterion-referenced tests is the local districts determining what passing level is acceptable. Is it 30 percent, 45 percent, 60 percent or 90 percent for students on a task? In any event the teachers' job is to help the students become more proficient at the task. The test advantage is that we can relate it much more closely to what is taught in the classroom.

The break-it-down-into-its-parts approach to reading is exemplified by standardized testing. The devisers of these tests believe that a series of discrete sub-skills or behaviors that can be independently observed and thus measured define reading. The more we break down the processes, the better we can understand and measure reading. The behavioral empiricists support the above viewpoint arguing and applying B.F. Skinner's theory to reading. They say that reading is a habit system. It is based on mechanistic positive reinforcement of good habits and discouragement of bad habits. Children cannot separate the process into parts. Thus they cannot separate good habits from bad. Lesson steps must be discrete. The approaches recommended are basal readers, workbooks in phonics, word-attach skills, vocabulary and identification of main ideas and detail. Of course, the above follows the standardized test design. Thus we get the idea that reading is what tests measure.

There is needed a definition of reading based on what children do when they read. Marks on a page in a holistic process are transformed into meanings. What students bring, over a period of time, to reading, broadens and deepens the experience. Children need to be able to respect the content of reading. Children need to develop language experiences that enrich their reading. Alone and in small groups they need to know how to apply their intelligence to comprehending the meaning of experiences. The process in reading is similar to learning how to talk. All children have learned to talk. They have used trial and error and succeeded. We did not classify or categorize children before they came to school. We let them talk. We did not understand how children learned and applied their language. Yet children did learn to talk, just as they can learn to read.

Green points out that the majority of testing opponents believe that minority group interests are often violated by abuses of tests. Mercer indicated that from 50 to 300% more blacks and Mexican-Americans were identified as mentally retarded than could be reasonably expected from their proportion of the population using I.Q. tests. Padilla and Garza show that Spanish-surnamed children have a 2 to 2½ times greater chance for placement in segregated slow learner classrooms than the majority population in Texas and California.

Test publishers have failed to consider problems of testing minority children. Tests are used for sorting-out and determining the economic and social future of school-aged children. Problems of testing cannot be solved by recreating standardized tests for minorities based on antiquated concepts of intelligence and achievement.

De Avila and Havassy (1973) conclude that we need a new approach. They recommend the Program Assessment Pupil Instruction (PAPI) system. This generates two basic types of information by means of computer data-processing. The first type is statistical in nature. It is meant for funding. The second is for teachers; it recommends classroom activities. The test battery consists of four tests. The first is Cartoon Conservation Scales (CCS); the second is Water Level Task, the third is Figural Intersection Test, and the fourth is a Serial Task, individually administered. The first three tests are paper and pencil group tests. Achievement and developmental levels are considered for each child and their referent groups. If a child does not understand a concept sets of classroom activities are recommended. Chronological age is used for the child's peer or referent group. However, the PAPI system can be designed so that the child's referent group can be described on the basis of grade, ethnic group or sex, etc. I would certainly like to explore this type of testing at our school.

Our school has responded to the individual needs of students. We have broadended their school experiences. We have focused on the thinking process as well as the development of values and personalities. ae have developed and participated in network activities emphasizing a humanistic mainstream climate for all of the arts, special education, bi-lingual, open and traditional education.

In all our programs we attempt to develop cooperation among students in various projects. We believe students must learn to work together in real life. We encourage the efforts necessary to learn the difficult process of problem solution through cooperative efforts.

Frequent testing leads to the discouragement of students. Students who are discouraged give up on the task. Success leads to skill development through repeated performance. We must encourage and make classrooms a joyful experience for all children.

The area of reading comprehension cries out for alternative assessment. Do reading comprehension tests sample processes such as assimilation, convergent reasoning, evaluation, appraisal, or application? Do reading tests measure long-range goals of reading progress such as creating and stimulating reading interests, achieving breadth of reading experience, and enjoying reading for personal growth?

Lampard found reading comprehension tests have little relationship to outlining, summarizing or problem-solving of reading materials. Comprehension ability was not highly related to the ability to reorganize ideas just read.

Comprehension tests deal with end results and do not reveal the thinking of the reader as to how he got the answer. The reader might be able to answer more questions than asked. The tests impose conditions which determine readers' responses (multiple-choice, time allowed, etc.) Low comprehension does not necessarily represent zero comprehension; high scores do not mean the reader got everything. Comprehension varies from one kind of reading material to another according to difficulty which is determined by readers' informational background and vocabulary. Comprehension questions are not scaled in difficulty or by grade levels. A reader's performance is bound to the material presented. Grade score on comprehension tests tell us that the testee answered as many questions as children of a certain grade level. We are not told the quality or depth of comprehension, how it was obtained, how much more was learned from the reading, or how much the reader knew about the subject before the reading.

For comprehension reading tests measure skills which experts cannot show exist. Test scores learn little or no relationship to most major components of comprehension. They seem to measure sophistication in taking tests and the reader's informational background. Reading tests fail to assess the abilities to organize synthesize or apply the facts read.

In a broad definition of comprehension, critical reading definitely has major significance. A definition of critical reading has the following elements:

1. An inquiring attitude
2. Ability to supply and create standards for evaluation
3. Ability to temporarily suspend judgement and belief for understanding
4. Analytical ability to assess materials logic and structure. Differentiation of fact from opinion, as well as propaganda
5. Assessment of author through analysis of materials

I believe that not enough critical thinking activities are planned for the "poor" reader. Utilizing reading materials by Dr. Lawrence H. Cohen from our Broad Jump Summer Program at P.S. 75, I had several sessions with groups of children. I asked the children to select any story they had liked and read. The stories were illustrated and usually no more than four paragraphs, approximately 200 words.

The four areas were detail, inference, vocabulary in context and main idea. I asked the children to make-believe that they were explaining the story to a brother or sister. My instructions were completely ignored by Zuleiha, 8 years old, Fabian, 10 years old and Rafoa, 9 years old. The children personalized and started to tell stories of their own lives. Fabian stated:

> People living together in the same apartment. People who live in crowded houses like me. I have 4 sisters and 2 brothers. Nine people live in our apartment.

Zuleiha went into a discussion of the size of her apartment and the number of people, six, living in it. Rafoa told me that he shares a bunkbed with his brother. Zuleiha interrupted by stating with some feeling that she shared a room with her "stupid little brother. We always fight to get to the bathroom. We are going to move to a bigger apartment." Rafoa and Fabian discussed their bathroom situations and living arrangements. The students had no trouble in relating and identifying words such as apartment, together, crowd, stupid, share, fight, bedroom, bunkbeds and bathroom. Zuleiha and Fabian told me about compound words and seemed quite comfortable. I asked the students to make up questions. Zuleiha dominated question session asking: Would you like to live this crowded together? Would you like to have a cat sleep on your bed? Would you like the house dirty or clean? Do they fight about using the bathroom? Zuleiha further ventured a wish to have six bathrooms.

Fabian, Zuleiha, and Rafoa agreed that the family in the story wanted to move and get a bigger apartment. This was the complete opposite of the conclusion which was that the child wanted to remain in the crowded apartment because its just right.

A detail analysis supports the students opinion. The only affective details in the story are in the last paragraph. This isn't enough to change their opinion based on the affective elements in their lives. I'd say this material was great for getting to know the students. In Piagetean terms I believe their responses indicated pre-operational thinking involving a lack of exposure to abstract thinking.

In many ways the sub-skill comcept of reading breaks down as you talk to children. Comprehension is definitely not a long list of sub-skills. What Zuleiha, Fabian and Rafoa retained appears to depend on what the child intends to retain, the instructions given before reading and the active reaction, the degree of involvement. My attempt to ask questions involving broader comprehension led me to a better understanding of these children's living conditions. I consider the children's reactions to illustrate that comprehension can be considered a group of processes working more or less simulianeously in the act of reading. Above all what comes across clearly is the quality of the thinking process emphasizing word meanings, idea relationships and reasoning.

The area of competency testing should be considered as remaining open to new directions, innovations, changes and different types of assessments. At our school we have a broad range of educational objectives, the foundation for our humanistic education environment. We have established a school in which people:

1. Approach learning with confidence and joy.
2. See themselves as worthwhile persons and have an active positive regard for every person as an individual.

3. Develop an understanding of human social systems and physical environment.
4. Develop and reassess personal values.
5. Develop social skills including conciliation, persuasion, honest communication and group decision-making.
6. Develop the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, computation, learning and critical thinking.
7. Develop and maintain good health habits, physical fitness recreational skills and positive body awareness.
8. Are willing to take risks, make commitments, become involved and be accountable for their actions.
9. Have a sense of awe and wonder, a capacity for esthetic appreciation and enjoyment.
10. Are creative, curious, self-directed and open to new experiences.
11. Recognize their individual actions can influence the course of events.
12. Recognize the humor and incongruity that is a part of the human experience.

It is clear that present competency and achievement testing cannot measure our schools' education goals.

Jerrold Zacharias of the Education Development Center at the May 1979 Conference of The National Consortium on Testing developed some fascinating ideas proposing the development of test item banks open to the public. He believes the public need to have tests. The most you can say about tests is: great, okay and something wrong.

If I find out somethings wrong, how do you get at what's wrong? Zacharias believes you need easily available tests. Tests should be on newsprint. We should create test item banks containing test items, criticism and commentaries. The product would be like a Sears Roebuck catalogue. Teachers, principals, parents and kids could contribute items. Computers can handle inventory for the data bank. I could then put in my order for tests that do certain things such as eliminate for cultural bias. The computerized arrangements could be used to provide photo-offset copy to schools. This sounds like a great idea. Zacharias suggests you write to him for more information about his ideas. I will, too.

David McClelland in the May 1979 National Consortium Conference has some superb ideas on developing open competence testing. He contrasts open type tests such as drivers or typing tests with the SAT. A drivers test is criterion sampling. You've got a slice, a sample of behavior, not some indicator of it. In norm-referenced testing, as well as Degrees of Reading Power you're sorting out people into better or worse. But the connection between the indicator and the competence may be speculative. A second characteristic of an open competence test is that its an operant rather than a respondent test. You're responding on a test, not choosing among alternatives. Another element of an operant test involves the partnership aspect. There is a collaborative relationship between tester and test-takers. The goal is to pass everyone.

I'd say that the goals fo minimum competency should be exclusively based on operant testing. We want to help people, our students to do much better and not screen out or deny employment opportunities to the educationally disadvantaged and/or low achieving students.

The concept of open competency has an enormous relevance to the area of written competency. There is a tremendous need to develop motivational strategies, to make writing more relevant to the lives of students. We have done a great deal of writing activities during the last ten years at P.S. 75 Manhattan. Teacher and Writers Collaborative has produced many student products (children's books, articles, video-tapes, plays, radio programs, etc.) However, New York States Preliminary Competency Testing In Writing is one phase of a program that seems to emphasize not minimum competency but maximum competency. College graduates and doctoral students would find it difficult to achieve the goals and objectives in writing reports, editing, proof-reading and persuading influential people to change programs. I thought minimum competency would include the stimulation of creative writing experiences, and involve areas of interest such as writing poetry, filling out a job application, or drivers license, a letter of complaint about a product or developing buying choices. We had students write some fascinating reports on how they evaluated different types of sneakers on the market and how they made their choices.

The stated purpose of the state's P.C.T. is to improve the teaching of writing. But the Bureau of English in New York State seems to be going about the improvement process by stressing spelling, capitalization and grammar difficulties.

Their improvement activities seem singularly unimaginative and lack any hint of creativity. I strongly recommend that they read "Rose, where did you get that red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children" by Kenneth Koch, Vintage Books, $2.45. I'd also recommend "Being With Children" by Phil Lopate, Bantam Books, $1.95, which is the story of Teacher and Writers Collaborative at P.S. 75 Manhattan.

If I were designing a minimum competency test whose purpose is the improvement of teaching in the writing area, I'd select as a test characteristic children's ability to respond and write great poetry. (minimum competency?) Then you've got to design your teaching around it. This is the kind of teaching to the test that pays off. You're teaching students to think and perform in a certain way. Our dissatisfaction with student writing needs fresh approaches, new alternatives, not just the re-packaging of unsuccessful approaches re-named minimal competency testing.

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PROBLEMS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF A STATE LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

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I. WHY THE DEBATE IN REGARD TO MINIMUM COMPETENCY

In another time and in another place, the idea of minimum competency would not have received so much as a raised eyebrow in debate in state legislative chambers.

It must be realized that the social and technological changes of the past quarter of a century are the reasons that there is debate today about minimum competency.

In another time, when some students were not performing they could be absorbed into the unskilled labor pool of society or as part of an agrarian community.

In another place we did not have television beaming into the living rooms to affect the minds of these same low performing students, enticing them about what every American should possess to be part of Mainstreet, U.S.A. Unfortunately, a larger than expected number of these students just happened to be black, minorities, and poor whites. It is within this backdrop that the issue of minimum competency has emerged.

Our initial response to the dilemma posed by these events reminds me of the tale told by Canadian economist and author, Stephen Butler Leacock, who wrote a selection entitled Gertrude the Governess with this description of the "hero's" action:

> "He flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

I sometimes suspect that those of us in education who are responsive to pressures for competency testing are too often inclined to do the same thing. Such action, of course, brings up an immediate question: "How do you know where you are going?" The answer, of course, is that too often we do not.

Unless one has determined where it is that one wants to go and unless one has selected predetermined check-points, how will one ever know whether or not, in fact, they have arrived?

This to me is the essense of "educational assessment" and the resulting product is called minimum competency. You predetermine objectives and goals; you establish check-points; and then you assess your program to establish where it is that you find yourself.

In Michigan we believe we have come up with an education "road-map" and we know where we are going in relationship to the competency movement.

Ten years ago, in 1969, with the support of the Governor and with the authorization of the Legislature, the Michigan State Board of Education embarked upon a controversial and revolutionary program whose impact upon equality of educational opportunity is only now being fully realized and appreciated. It is called the Michigan Education Assessment Program where all fourth, seventh and tenth graders are tested annually in reading and mathematics, and sampling in eight other curricular areas is taking place.

The basic purpose of state assessment is to measure educational needs against expected learnings:

...so that human and financial resources can be applied where the greatest needs are indicated,

...where inservice training can be undertaken,

...and, so that the better programs can be identified.

The expected student learnings in Michigan are called Minimal

Performance Objectives and were developed by Michigan educators, citizens, and those with specialities in the various learning areas.

There are ten components to the state's Elementary Essential Skills Program. The reading and mathematics tests, beginning in 1973, were written by teachers and others to measure expected learnings in those areas, and are criterion-referenced tests. I must point out immediately that even though the minimal nature of the skills tested are acknowledged, only seventy percent of the fourth and seventh graders and only fifty-five percent of the tenth graders reached the

II. THE COMPONENTS OF THE COMPETENCY MOVEMENT

For the most of us, we can agree that the states are responsible for education. In Michigan, as in the majority of the other states, there has also been a long standing belief in local district control and autonomy. However, it is my conviction that the state's responsibility for equal educational opportunity for all children and youth supercedes the notion of local district control and autonomy. We have begun to move Michigan education from a policy based upon screening, sorting and selecting to a policy of providing equality, equity and excellence. This shift in my opinion is the greatest problem to state implementation. No matter what the geographical location, race, ethnic origin, or socio-economic condition of a family, I believe each student should, in fact, must be, motivated to acquire the basic skills.

I believe this to be the number one public policy which should be translated into an action program by each state.

Public policy number two is that the state education assessment programs should assess certain basic standards or skills which almost all students should attain. Norm-referenced tests, which are designed so that a certain percentage of students "fail" are inappropriate for this purpose. It may be, however, that current instructional practices....time limitations and textbooks.... do not make this expectation a reality for those students the schools really need to better serve.

Public policy number three is for the states to assume that there are other ways and to find them to meet the needs of the less advantaged.

Through student needs assessment, state compensatory education funds are awarded to districts who show the greatest unmet needs on the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) tests. In addition, experimental and demonstration program proposals are required to respond to unmet needs which are shown in the MEAP results. In this way, we are seeking new methods and programs which can help us to meet the challenge of students with different learning needs.

The states also have a responsibility to provide leadership to local districts. In preparing the MEAP results for local districts, various kinds of district, school, classroom, and even every pupil level reports are made available.

Through dissemination seminars and consultations with local districts, the State Department staff assists local district personnel to interpret the reports and to develop strategies to assist students with particular needs.

The Michigan Educational Assessment Program has brought into sharp focus the variance between the "old" and the "new". The old being (1) time, (2) days, (3) limited recall, and (4) standardization. The new being (1) expectations, (2) needs assessment, (3) delivery system modification and, (4) evaluation for improvement.

The differences between the old and the new are staggering indeed. Even though minimum competency programs vary in detail and I personally do not support most of them that I have reviewed, they are performing a valuable service.

There are four basic components of competency based education.

The first component is the establishing of what some call competency standards. In Michigan, we have called them student expectations. Few schools across the nation have established measurable student expectations, which is the first necessary step to sound competency based education.

The second component is the establishing of what some call minimum competency tests. In Michigan, we call them student assessment tests. Few schools across the nation have established criterion referenced student assessment tests, which is the second necessary step to sound competency based education.

The third component is the establishing of what some call professional development of school staff. In Michigan, we have begun this process through state-funded staff development centers and a phaselogy called "GESTALT" Few schools across the country have the resources or have set the priority to retrain and reorient staff along with making needed curriculum changes.

The fourth component is the establishing of a reporting system to parents in terms of the expectations, testing and instruction. In Michigan, we have just begun to consider the necessary incentives to make such a state-wide and dramatic shift in reporting results. Few schools across the country have developed such a linkage, which is also essential if the competency movement is to survive.

The movement has gained far more political and media support than either parental or professional support. Politicians in many places have hurried to get on the bandwagon, hoping that minimum competency testing will produce the educational utopia the public is seeking.

Educators, on the whole, have been divided, primarily because they have been wary of too simplistic a solution to complex personal, psychological and social problems affecting children, youth and their families. As a result, no clear leadership has emerged from the educational community, leaving as has been characteristic of the past twenty-five years those outside the educational field setting the education agenda.

Since we, as educators, are far from agreement as to the "basics", the books and articles will continue to flow about "our knee jerk reactions", "and our cases of hyper-rationalization" about the new fads in education.

There is indeed an urgent need for national educational leadership to emerge to address the problems which have generated the proliferating fads of the 60's and 70's in response to the social and technological upheavals of the 50's.

III. DIFFICULTIES TO INSTITUTIONALIZE C.B.E

One of the difficulties in the educational field is the adversary relationship that collective bargaining and accelerating cost have created between teacher groups and school boards.

Another difficulty is the decentralized nature of American education, with textbook publishers and testing companies wielding great influence on what transpires in a given school year by the materials purchased in each of the 16,000 school districts.

Even if we could overcome these two significant influences, there are two other very legitimate reasons why minimum competency movements will be difficult to institutionalize.

First, and the most obvious is that most of today's school personnel have not been prepared in our colleges of education to provide instruction in terms of the four aspects of competency based education outlined above.

Second, and although not as obvious at first, but of far greater importance is the fact that by and large there exists little, if any, relationship (1) between what parents and teachers expect of students, (2) the kinds of textbooks schools purchased, (3) the kinds of standardized test used and (4) the locally developed report cards sent home to parents.

In other words, unless we develop a relationship between these four basic pillars of the schooling process, it will be of little value to retrain school staffs in traditional ways.

It was not until 1954, 178 years after independence, that the nation was called to task in regard to its education system. From that historic moment there has begun a move toward equality, equity, and excellence as the new national educational policy.

Competency based education could become the vehicle by which I believe this shift can be ultimately fulfilled.

However, there is missing that set of uniform ingredients in every state that made the current system so effective and enduring.

Unless those ingredients, state by state, are identified and as of this writing it or they have not, it is unlikely that competency movement will endure since the odds are overwhelming.

The odds are

1. Schooling currently is based upon school time rather than student needs.
2. Schooling currently is labor-intensified thus improvements are costly and indirect.
3. Schooling currently is not related to life-role competencies thus credits produced may or may not explain one's abilities.
4. Schooling currently is process oriented rather than product oriented making it difficult to establish acceptable standards.

5. Schooling currently has no formal agreements with busines and industry regarding its value for inclusion into the world of work.
6. Schooling currently is highly decentralized with each of some 16,000 school boards and committees determining the major policy directions, with principals and teachers establishing the specific quality controls that vary among more than 50,000 buildings

Yes, there will be tough times ahead, but they need not be traumatic We should look upon the competency movement as an opportunity to test our own abilities and skills, to demonstrate that schooling does indeed make a difference, even for the "have nots". I believe we are on the crest of an educational breakthrough unprecedented in this century, and we need not drown in waves of self-pity.

As Jesse Jackson has so eloquently stated:

> "We must spend some time on the five B's....blacks, browns, buses, budgets and buildings....but we must spend an even greater amount of time and energy on the five A's....attention, attendance, atmosphere, attitude and achievement."

IV. THE MICHIGAN APPROACH

Since 1969, we in Michigan have been concerned about the performance of our students and therefore, the State Board of Education initiated a state-wide competency based education program that has resulted in the adoption of over fifty new laws, regulations, court opinions and state policies.

The program has brought into being the identification of the four Michigan preprimary development foundations, the ten Michigan essential skills and the four Michigan life-role competencies. The program is being carried out in a cooperative state-local effort. The need for state and local cooperation, with assistance from colleges and universities, is critical to advancing the competency movement.

I think the competency movement makes sense because competency based education defines in advance of instruction, things any student ought to be able to do in a reasonable amount of time.

It is accompanied by instruction and testing related to what is expected, and offers an opportunity for a student to acquire the skills or competencies beyond the required time.

In an effort to implement this concept throughout the state, I have offered to parents six simple steps to _utilize_ in discussing competency based education with school staffs. These same six simple steps I encourage all teachers and principals to _internalize_ into the schooling process.

Success toward this long term goal would address most of the problems which have besieged the education profession during the past quarter of a century.

My _calling card_ in support of the competency movement is:

First, that teachers specify in advance of instruction what is to be accomplished in any classroom for the period of time designated.

Second, that all teaching materials and textbooks be related to those expectations so that in no way would textbooks be used as the expectations to be accomplished.

Third, that all tests related to a student's performance and rating be related to the expectations on a criterion basis.

Fourth, that report cards and reports to parents be redesigned in such a way that they explicitly allow parents to know whether or not their children have acquired the expectations.

Fifth, that school officials, building-by-building, communicate to parents what alternative or supplemental services are available for those students who, for whatever reason, fail to meet the expectations within the required school year.

Sixth, and finally, that school personnel be trained and retrained through teacher preparation and staff development to accomplish the five tasks identified above.

Not all of these six activities currently exist in our schools, and only through continued state encouragement and local leadership will they gradually come into being, while this is taking place, slowly but hopefully.... there is need to develop a sort of chronological record of student progress for parents. Such a student chronology currently only exists for college students.

We in education will have to accept the fact that the variance between one's education and one's schooling is greater today than ever before, and that in any given year of 9,000 hours of living the school engages the student in school only 900 of those hours or one-tenth of the time. I call the 900 hours intentional school experiences and the 8,100 hours of incidental societal learnings (a lot of which take place when we are supposedly sleeping).

The competency movement will help us to make it more explicit as to what can and should actually take place within the 900 hours of intentional school experiences.

I have a funny feeling that if some evaluator took the lesson plans of a group of teachers at any particular grade level in any one of our 50,000 buildings and quantified them into 900 hours of reasonable required time, I think they would be in far excess of the hours of attainment for most of the children, and some subject areas probably would not even be included.

When we were scantioned to screen, sort and select we could justify this, but in this new era of equality, equity and excellent there is an urgent need to be more specific as to what can be reasonably accomplished in the time alloted.

V. THE PROBLEMS AND promises

There are, as I noted, a number of problems related to the competency movement. A half-dozen seem worth mentioning.

First, if improperly and hastily set in motion it could be detrimental to the progress of high and low achieving students.

Second, if utilized as a graduation standard, it could result in a disproportionate number of students opting for other less favorable alternatives.

Third, if poorly explained, it could be used as an evaluation of teacher-school effectiveness, and such comparisons could lead to even greater staff insecurity.

Fourth, if a plan of action is lacking, the results of such a program could lead to tracking students.

Fifth, if "acceptable levels" are initially established as low minimums, attainment by too many students could place the program in the position of being a farce.

Sixth, if every school district and state heads off, in the name of competency based education, in differing directions as now seems to be the case, the results will be its demise.

I believe the potential for competency based education far exceeds the pitfalls if we could leave this conference with agreement on the need for a cadre of national educational leaders to formulate the promise competency based education offers. Six good reasons come to mind to support this position.

First, competency based education (mastery learning) has the promise of truly individualizing instruction to respond to individual student needs, regardless of race, creed, sex or color.

Second, competency based education has the promise of bringing about cohesiveness in the training and schooling process, something long overdue.

Third, competency based education offers the best hope of distinguishing between what I have called the "intentional school experience" and the "incidental social learnings".

Fourth, competency based education has the potential of shifting the priorities of schooling from process to product or resources to results.

Fifth, competency based education holds out the promise of bringing parents back into the schooling process and assuring taxpayers that the schools can indeed make a difference below the midpoint of the normal distribution curve.

Sixth, competency based education provides a possible means of linking education and employment, something badly needed today for a good number of students.

VI. SUMMARY

This morning, I have attempted as a first step to explain why the debate about the competency movement and as a second step to identify the four components on competency based education.

Third, I then discussed the difficulties to institutionalizing the competency movement from the state perspective.

Fourth, I briefly outlined the basic features of the Michigan Competency Based Education Program which is the oldest individual student reporting state program in the nation.

Fifth, I then tried to explain why technological, social, political and economic changes of the past twenty-five years have fostered the competency movement.

Finally, I zeroed in on why the competency movement should be supported.

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The country has within these past twenty-five years clearly started down the road toward equality and equity. To be stymied at this juncture would be to turn a very good system that screened, sorted and selected into a mediocre system of equality and equity.

Excellence in terms of excelling for nearly all students must, therefore, become the single most important goal of the schools if our promises are to overtake our problems.

For that reason, I believe the competency movement must be given an opportunity to survive.

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THE NEW ABC'S FOR A NEW EDUCATIONAL AGENDA

Chuck Stone

Syndicated Columnist and Television Commentator

Periodically, wisdom from our comic pages dares to insert itself as a part of American folklore.

The confession that "the fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings," was translated into nitty-gritty lingo by that little comic page possum from Georgia, Pogo, who declared: "We has met the enemy and they is us."

Another delightful comic page philosopher, Charles Schultz who has enriched our lives with "Peanuts" came up with a similar aphoristic gem two years ago.

Linus was talking with Charlie Brown and he says, "I think I've learned the secret of life.

"I went to the doctor yesterday because I had a sore throat. The nurse put me in a small room. I could hear a kid screaming his head off."

Continues Linus to a fascinated Charlie Brown, "When the doctor came in to see me, I told him I was glad I wasn't in that other room. "'Yes,' he said, 'that kid will have to have his tonsils out. You're lucky. You only have a mild inflammation.'"

Concludes Linus: "The secret of life, Charlie Brown, is to be in the right room."

The crisis in American education has been diagnosed from the painfully inept perception that our system has been inhabiting the wrong room.

Our approach to educational inequities among the poor and minorities, declining standardized test scores, diminishing competencies in mathematics, worsening verbal skills and academically bankrupt school systems has been to treat education as if it were an appendage on the body politic rather than as an integral part of our social order.

We say "it" instead of "us." We diagnose educational ills as if they were Linus's friend in the wrong room.

With all of the scholarship that distinguishes our teachers colleges and graduate schools, we still have been unable to transform scholarship into tutorship.

With a multi-million industry of educational research by government grants, foundations and universities, we are incapable of utilizing research methods to produce better learning methods.

For the past 25 years, Americans have thrown billions of dollars down the sewer of educational failure.

Thucydides promised us that history repeats itself, that "events as they really did happen are very likely to repeat themselves at some future time---if not exactly the same, yet very similar."

Educational concepts run in cycles. They have different names, enter different political doors, but they are invariably similar in content and methodology.

What was once adulated as "compensatory education" is now extolled as "competency-based education."

"Back to basics", "alternative schools" or "schools within schools," "minimum competency testing" and "competency-based curriculum" are variations on the same theme. That theme is the job we should have been doing in the first place -- devising a pedagogical system that can teach children of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to master their cognitive skills.

Educators spend many years conquering the arcane elements of differential cognitive style. But Sly and the Family Stone wrote a hit song about the need to adapt various methods to divergent learning problems. They called it "Different Strokes for Different Folks."

With the burgeoning awareness of the minimum competency movement as if Americans were little children discovering their navels for the first time, there is one danger in its application.

That is the excessive reliance on standardized testing.

I can think of no more educationally debilitating nor creativity-stifling instrument than the lockstep of standardized testing.

It is indeed the enemy, especially to the enhancement of individuality and the nourishment of divergent thinking vis-as-vis convergent thinking.

This is no sweeping indictment of testing. Tests serve invaluable and necessary functions. And they have six uses --assessment, diagnosis, evaluation, instruction, placement and prediction.

Only when they become an end in themselves rather than a facilitating process do tests become apologia for educational fascism.

When we rely on tests solely for information about a pupil's position, they are extremely limited. Why do we need to administer a standardized test to learn that a particular class is achieving below a certain norm. The home room teacher, Mrs. Johnson could have told us that.

Standardized tests can never enlighten us as to why. They only report what.

Show me any two contrasting normative distributions of test scores and I will tell you which ones are black and white, rich and poor, South and North, inner city and suburbia, and those with mothers with college education.

Even the godfather of the testing mafia, the Educational Testing Service admits a strong correlation between socio-economic status and test scores.

ETS has a table which shows the average test score on the SAT and the media family income. Thus, a student whose family has an income of $16,740 will, on the average, score between 500 and 549 on the SAT. A student whose family has an income of $9,560 will, on the average, score between 250 and 299.

I cite those family incomes because the higher one is the median white family income and the lower one, a difference of $7,000, is the median black income.

We are rapidly approaching the time when the American people are going to insist on either a moratorium on standardized testing or more public controls, such as the recent New York state law which requires testing agencies to release test scores to people who take tests.

Too long has standardized testing, especially IQ testing, abused its welcome in the home of American education. I think the best definition of an IQ was framed by Henry S. Dyer, former vice-president of the Educational Testing Service and one of the developers of the SAT. Said Dr. Dyer: "An IQ is a dubious normative score wrapped up in a ratio that is based upon an impossible assumption about the equivalence of human experience and the opportunity to learn."

Dr. Dyer's opinion has become virtual doctrine today. A growing consensus among educators maintains that IQ tests are severely circumscribed in their diagnostic properties. In some jurisdictions, IQ tests are outlawed.

If that is true, then standardized tests, especially those constructed by ETS, ought to be banned.

In Arthur Whimby's book, "Intelligence Can Be Taught," he authoritatively defends the proposition that there is no essential difference between IQ tests and so-called aptitude tests.

The items on the adult Stanford-Binet and the items in the SAT, especially the verbal section, are almost identical. Moreover, continues Whimby, "statistical studies show that scores on the Stanford-Binet correlate highly with the SAT as they do with the traditional IQ test. The only real difference between the two is that the Stanford-Binet is reported as an IQ whereas each section of the SAT is reported as a scaled score that ranges from 200 to 800, with a mean of about 500."

To prevent test misuse and misinterpretations, it might be appropriate for each educational jurisdiction to develop its own tests which not only are competency-based, but are geared to the demographic and economic realities of their respective regions.

In Gary, Indiana where a minimum competency program was initiated in 1974, a mathematics proficiency test was reviewed by the technical staff of a large local industry. The staff concluded that if the students performed successfully on that particular test, they would have no problems with the mathematics required for any of the company's entry jobs.

As Bruce Llewellyn, president of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation and the former president of the country's third largest black business, Fedco stores told me, "I don't need kids who can solve algebraic equations. I need kids who can tell me that if one can of beans costs 29 cents, seven cans will cost $2.03."

The mathematics test in Gary may have been criterion-referenced or norm-referenced. That's not as important as the fact that it had economic relevance for the school system's pupils.

Further dramatic evidence of the stark limitations of standardized testing has been the steady national decline of SAT scores. Since 1965, the average SAT verbal score has nosedived 49 points from 476 to 427. Since 1965, the average SAT mathematical score has declined from 502 to 467.

Why? ETS which constructs those tests and the College Entrance Examination Board which owns them don't have the foggiest notion.

They know as much about the reasons why as a half-blind dyspeptic orangutan understands how he got that way.

Nor can any of the nation's educational experts explain why mathematical skills scores are declining or the reading and writing gap is actually widening.

I cite those trends only to demonstrate the enormous psychometric ignorance which attends standardized testing.

Standardized tests have been simplistically called thermometers by the testing industry's defensive advocates. Just as a thermometer measures climatic conditions, tests only assess a pupil's education.

But we need more than thermometers. Barometers may tell us why something is happening instead of the mere what.

Rather than the IQ, we need to concentrate on the LQ -- the learning quotient.

This approach has been postulated by the University of California psychologist Richard Rohwer who asked this seemingly Jensen question in a research article: "why does school success depend more directly on ethnicity, SES and IQ than on the ability to learn?"

Answering his own question, Rohwer developed a new method of individualized instruction and testing for both lower income black students and middle-income white students. In his research experiments, Rohwer was able to register significant increases in test scores. In fact, the posttest scores of the low SES black sample in the experimental group were actually raised to the performance level of the high-SES whites in the control group.

The LQ or learning quotient approach has been validated in other research experiments, notably University of California's Richard Crutchfield's success with programmed self-instructional forms. Here again, low-income minority pupils improved their performance.

As Whimby's book confirms, intelligence can be taught.

But we must develop tests whose diagnosis tells us whether or not a pupil can learn, not what his or her test score is.

As defined by Rohwer, learning ability referrs to the capacity for acquiring, retaining and producing new information. Neither an IQ nor an SAT can measure that quality.

And that is one of the glaring deficiencies of the minimum competency movement.

It focuses upon the test as an educational end in itself, rather than on the validity of the instructional process.

However, even with that shortcoming, minimum competency testing is still a major step forward.

Once the competencies to be measured have been determined by the school system and the parents working together, then a checkpoint testing system at specific intervals can help identify weaknesses.

Such tests will not explain how to remediate, but what weaknesses to illuminate. The need for prescriptive testing is still remains. The urgency for innovative programs still obtains.

One such program is Headstart.

It should come as no surprise that Headstart carries a longitudinal impact on pupils that may go beyond the mere transition from pre-school to early childhood.

Such a conclusion was obvious to upper income white parents who had been enrolling their children in pre-school programs for decades. It is only when the poor sought the advantages of this same privilege that an enlistist and racist Congress rose up and claimed that the broadening of Headstart programs to include a wide array of supportive services interfered with the family's responsibility.

But a recent study by a team headed by Cornell University professor Irving Lazar examined 2,100 children of low income families. The study found a strong correlation between Headstart and academic self-determination.

According to the study, Headstart graduates have less need for remedial classes, encounter fewer legal problems and are 50 per cent less likely to drop out of high school.

As Lazar's optimistic report on Headstart was being lavished on us, another exercise in educational pessimism was being dumped on the American people.

Arthur Jensen is back. What makes Jensen important is not the Hitlerian racism contained in his research conclusions but the demonstrable proof of the limited horizons of testing.

In his latest psychometric polemic titled "Bias in Mental Testing," Jensen relies exclusively on test scores and patterns to offer a series of wide-ranging conclusions, none of which advance education, but like a thermomenter, tells us, baby, its's cold outside -- a fact we have long known as we have shivered in the winter of our academic descontent.

Jensen claims that his analysis of standardized testing results further reinforces his previous conclusions that blacks perform more poorly on tests. But this time, he has introduced a new racial wrinkle. His test scores prove, he claims, that when black and white children of equal socio-economic status are tested, whites score on an average of 12 IQ points higher than blacks.

The implications are ominous. If Jensen's research holds up about blacks of the same SES background scoring lower than whites, it would indicate that blacks are either congentially inferior or they are not receiving equal educational opportunities.

Yet, tests do not reveal black cognitive flexibility. Young blacks can play the most convoluted verbal games of the dozens, recite interminable verses of the monkey and the lion, but fail abysmally to retain a mere paragraph of Shakespeare. As for cognitive flexibility, it abounds in ghetto experiences, one of which the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once narrated.

Jensen is like cancer. It's there and must be confronted.

Without having examined Jensen's data, I'll make one a priori dispute right now and that is Jensen's comparison of whites and black on the same SES background as being faulty.

SES variable not only include income, but the educational attainments, especially of the mother and her percentage of time at home. I've often said if we could give the world Jewish mothers, we would raise achievement levels overnight.

Thus, for example, a white mother who finished Radcliffe and is at home in the suburbs with her husband who is a lawyer earning $50,000 a year will impact differently on her children than the black mother who finished Lincoln, who works and whose husband is a steelworker, yet their combined incomes are $50,000, they live in a middle-class ghetto where many of the kids speak black English.

Let me digress for a moment here. We are on the threshold of one of the most dangerous movements in educational history -- the teaching of black English. This diversionary tactic only detracts from empirically validated methods of instruction.

Black English is a semantic illegitimacy. Instead of increasing intellectual proficiency, it only reinforces separate but equal inferiority.

Black kids are capable of learning and achieving without being lowered into the instructional cesspool of Black English.

In fact, in one city, black pupils in a 98 per cent segregated black school district had higher achievement scores than the black kids in the racially integrated district to which they were bussed. There are reasons why this occurred in Dallas, but Arthur Jensen doesn't know why nor can he enlighten us with his warehouse of tests.

Today, some 35 states are either mandating or advocating minimum competency programs. Once again, the results for minorities have been disastrous.

We know what's wrong. We either don't know why nor is there any accompanying instructional program to narrow cognitive disparities between whites and blacks.

In North Carolina, minimum competency testing was mandated nine years ago when Charlotte initiated inter-county busing. Recent test results reveal that only five per cent of the white pupils flunked one or more of the tests, but eight times as many black pupils -- 43 per cent -- flunked one or more of the tests.

Again, we failed to tap the lodestone of black creativity with those tests. (prose and poetry).

But after nine years of minimum competency testing, you would think one or both of two things would have occurred. First, the program would have been tightened up with earlier and more frequent checkpoint tests. Secondly, the school board would have developed a remediation program similar to those contained in the research experiments of the two California psychologists mentioned earlier.

Rather than a neurotic infatuation with poor test results among the poor and minorities, let us develop a magnificent obsession for the causes of poor academic performance.

Minimum competency testing has always existed. But it was obscured for the dubious merits of social promotion. The need to pass a test was ignored if a student grew big enough and stayed in school long enough.

Yes, let us demand minimum competency standards in our schools.

Let grade promotion be based upon academic achievement.

But minimum competency must become a two-tiered process.

If pupils are to be held to a criterion of minimum competency, so should teachers.

But any reliance for teacher competency on such standardized tests as the National Teacher Examination -- the infamous NTE -- will only replicate the identical futility of standardized tests for students.

School systems should individually decide the minimum proficiencies they expect from their teachers based on the systems' demographic realities -- not on the nation's normative distribution. A good teacher can achieve desired results provided the teacher is informed from the beginning what is expected of her or him.

Instead of a single test, teachers should have a three-year probationary period during which they are observed and evaluated by a joint committee of educational experts and parents.

Rather than stopping at minimum competency testing which, as the North Carolina experience proves, does not help minorities, I would suggest an educational system incorporated the ABC's.

A for accountability.

B for bottomline.

C for competency-based curriculum.

Accountability would demand a minimum performance by the teacher.

Teachers are not magicians. But every one of us in this room knows there are outstanding teachers, excellent teachers, good teachers, average teachers, mediocre teachers and rotten teachers.

The tragedy of our schools system is that a majority of our teachers range from mediocre to rotten instead of from outstanding to good.

To know which is which, a system of performance-based evaluation should be instituted.

According to a study made of teacher performance in the classroom by Fred McDonald, of ETS, one of the few relevant people in that organization which is ripping off the American people, "the correlation between certain teacher's teaching styles and the progress their pupils made by the end of the year was unusually high." In one instance, reported McDonald, the teacher whose kids showed the most improvement of all started with a second-grade class of virtual illiterates."

Accountability is being resisted by teacher unions, but eventually parents and city councils are no longer going to accept the inverse relationship between teachers salaries and pupil scores. Teachers manage to win annual salary increases as their children's test scores go down just as rapidly.

Secondly, the bottom-line ought to be incorporated into education.

Once the board of education, the teachers union and the parents all working together have jointly determined a realistic bottom-line cost. That bottom-line cost can then become one of the criteria for evaluating an entire school system's performance.

For example, let's start with states and cities which now mandate minimum competency programs.

After four years, what were the results? How much did the system cost? Is one system more cost-effective than another? If one minimum competency testing program has an average cost of $3,000 per pupil and another has an average cost of $2,000 per pupil, but the achievement the percentage increase is the same, which system would you buy?

Finally, competency-based curriculum as it's being taught in the Washington, D. C. school system under its imaginative black superintendent, Vince Reed, is an individualized, sequential program deserving a full trial.

A competency-based curriculum is an educational process. Competency-based testing is an educational lockstep.

D. C.'s competency-based curriculum does four things:

1.) it specifies the skills to be demonstrated;

2.) it designs the learning activities to help the student achieve that objective;

3.) It mandates assessment instruments to measure the extent of pupil mastery;

4.) It raises the level of learning difficulty in progressive sequences as the pupil progresses.

The jury is still out on D. C.'s efforts. But this city which had some of the lowest standardized test scores in the nation will be watched closely for results.

As the Jacksons used to sing, A. B. C., it's easy as one, two, three.

Accountability for teachers.

Bottom-line for the entire school system.

Competency-based curriculum for the pupils.

But if we limit ourselves to competency-based testing, we will only prolong our educational agony. It must be reinforced with a total system designed to maximize pupil achievement and teacher proficiency.

Until we do this, like Linus, we will keep sitting in the one doctor's room, serene in our stupidity that we are lucky we are not that kid in the other room.

The secret of life is not to be in the right room.

The secret of life is to be certain that all children in all rooms have access to the same educational treatment.

AN INSIDE-OUTSIDE VIEW OF A MINIMUM COMPETENCY PROGRAM

Haron J. Battle

Educational consultant

Occasionally in education there is a movement that generates extensive national interest. Such exciting developments may produce significant changes in the effect that schools have on society, or they may become merely fruitless fads. Competence demonstrated by performance on tests as a requirement for high school graduation and for other purposes has become a critical and sometimes controversial issue among educators, legislators and other groups in all areas of the United States.

The minimum competency concept has been pursued with action by several states and local school districts. Currently it is being considered by numerous study committees in government and education. A review of what has been written and spoken on the subject reveals that there is considerable diversity in the conception, implementation and assessment of the current programs.

Public reaction to the movement has been mixed. On the one hand, there have been many expressions of concern about declining Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and other observations that indicate a need for more stress on basic learning in the schools; while on the other hand, there has been strong criticism of required competency testing as a strategy for improving the quality of education.

In their efforts to respond rapidly to public concerns and to their own awareness of a need for improvement in learning, it is understandable that legislators and educators in some cases have made judgmental errors in mandating, planning or implementing minimum competency programs. It is unfortunate, however, that some national spokespersons tend to transmit to the public their negative impressions of the total movement based on limited observation of a few programs that are victims of errors in design or operation. Such negative publicity may diminish community support for promising developments now in effect and may deter other schools and communities from exploring possibilities for a productive program. Because there have been varying degrees of success with minimum competency pursuits, it seems highly desirable for anyone interested in the movement to examine in considerable depth the design and operation of several programs before deciding to support or not to support such development.

Issues and action on the national scene have been examined extensively by other presenters in this Symposium. The purpose in this presentation is to consider a program in one local school district with which the presenter was directly involved as general administrator for instruction and special services during the first four years of the program's planning and implementation, and one subsequent year as an outside observer. It is hoped that the latter experience provides a unique opportunity to view the developments in perspective and with reasonable objectivity.

The limited time available will permit only a brief description of the program and the developmental process. Additional emphasis will be on observable effects of the thrust in the schools and a few concerns and suggested cautions for program developers.

Brief Description of the Gary Program

In 1974 the public school system of Gary, Indiana observed that its 2143 seniors were graduating with an average grade equivalent of 8.6 in reading and 9.0 in mathematics on the Stanford Test of Academic Skills. Ten per cent of the students ranked below the sixth grade in reading and seven per cent were below the sixth grade in mathematics. In addition, there were repeated reports of learning adjustment problems of local high school graduates on the job or in college. These observations and reports precipitated staff action that led to the School Board's adoption of a minimum competency program.

The Board policy has extended the requirements for high school graduation to include demonstrated proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and mathematics. Students not mentally handicapped are required to show by examination that they are able to read, speak and understand standard English; write a simple, correct and intelligible paragraph; and perform with reasonable mastery the fundamental mathematical processes. The new policy regarding reading and mathematics became effective for students graduating in 1977; while the requirement was made applicable initially for written communication in 1978 and oral communication in 1980.

The policy document further specified that within the following year teachers and administrators would develop minimum standards of achievement, methods of assessment, and a plan for prevention and remediation of deficiencies in the specified skills from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. During the first year, each high school principal was expected to notify seriously deficient tenth-grade students and their parents of the additional prerequisite for the diploma. Corrective programs, if not already operating, were to be in effect no later than September 1975 and were to be made known to the students who needed them.

The purpose of the policy as stated in the recommendation is to guarantee that all students graduate from the Gary schools competent in the basic skills, to institute preventive and remedial programs as a way of assuring this achievement, and to have all parties--staff, students, and parents--share in the responsibility for seeing that the primary goal is realized.

In October 1976, the Board approved the following addendum to the minimum competency policy for graduating seniors:

1. Denial of the diploma shall be based upon the following factors:
    a. Students shall have been provided at least one year of remediation in mathematics and reading.
    b. Parents of affected students shall have been notified in writing of the student's failure to pass or take the proficiency examination.
    c. Transfer-ins from outside the city shall be made aware of the proficiency requirements at the time of their enrollment but they may not necessarily meet the criteria of one year of remedial work.
    d. Students reaching their senior year and having failed the proficiency tests--with parental permission--will be given psychological examinations.
2. Seniors who have not met proficiency requirements shall be permitted to participate in graduation exercises but will not receive a diploma and shall be so notified in advance.
3. Summer school remedial classes shall be offered to seniors who have not met proficiency requirements and after August, such students shall have access to remedial classes and proficiency testing through the adult continuing education program.

4. Upon completing the proficiency requirements, the student may receive the diploma.

Implementation of the minimum competency program received top priority in many areas of the instructional program. In addition to leadership provided by administrators and supervisors in their respective areas, the Elementary and Secondary Curriculum Councils assumed major responsibility for coordinating the total development. Numerous subcommittees were formed to complete specific tasks and at various points there were opportunities for reactions and suggestions from all personnel in instruction and the special services. Primary attention was directed toward students in the tenth grade who, as the Class of 1977, would be the first graduates under the new policy. However, it was recognized immediately that students at all grade levels needed to be involved in a system-wide effort to improve mastery of basic skills.

Through the network of committees and councils objectives were defined for the four skill areas, beginning with reading and mathematics. In grades nine through twelve the major concern was to determine the minimum skills that students need for post-high school activities and responsibilities; while in the elementary schools the objectives focus on what is considered essential for each pupil to master in order to be ready for the next sequential learning steps that lead to the proficiency needed in high school and thereafter. In the total process it was made clear that the requirements were established to have every student achieve at least minimum mastery of the skills, with the understanding that most students will exceed the minimum level.

With the objectives in hand, the staff began to examine the curriculum and to make revisions necessary to provide adequate opportunities for all students to master the essential skills. Instruction in the subjects directly related to the required proficiencies was adapted to emphasize the objectives defined in the minimum competency program at each grade level. In addition, teachers in other subject areas included instruction in the required skills. For example, reading, mathematics, writing and speaking are taught through music, social studies, home economics, science and other subjects.

Numerous in-service activities have been conducted to help teachers improve the learning experiences for students to achieve the objectives in each grade and in the various disciplines. The staff development opportunities were facilitated in 1978 by the establishment of a Teacher Center with assistance from the U. S. Office of Education. From its beginning the Center has placed high priority on supportive services for the minimum competency program.

The next step in the developmental process was to devise assessment procedures and instruments. After considerable discussion the staff decided to check student competence progress in grades 2, 5 and 7; and then to begin the required proficiency tests in the ninth or tenth grade, depending on the subject area. Initially the checkpoint tests in grades 2 and 5 were administered only once each year. As a new feature in the 1977-78 school year, the fifth grade pupils who failed successively were given two additional opportunities to take the tests and receive remedial services before leaving the elementary schools. The seventh grade checkpoint tests and the high school proficiency examinations normally are administered twice during the school year.

The assessment is made with mastery tests based on the locally defined objectives. Technical assistance was provided by Westinghouse Learning Corporation in developing and processing some of the instruments. In all cases internal or external computer data processing facilitates the production of extensive analyses to show group and individual performance on each test as a whole and on specific skills.

Initially 75% mastery was the accepted standard for most of the tests. In selecting this level, the staff was seeking to establish the most appropriate balance between standards and a realistic number of students failing the test and consequently requiring diagnostic and remedial services. Also, the content of the tests is reviewed repeatedly for needed revisions and to make sure that multiple forms are equivalent.

The written language proficiency examination was developed in cooperation with Educational Testing Service. The staff begins the examination by having each student write a paragraph containing five to eight sentences on a specified topic. Gary teachers are trained by ETS personnel to use the holistic scoring method and each essay is read and scored by at least two teachers. In the original plan, if both teachers assigned a passing score to the paragraph, the student was considered to have achieved the required proficiency. Subsequently the assessment was expanded to include an objective component to supplement the holistic method by covering the mechanics of writing.

The total program and assessment procedures for oral communication were developed locally. All sophomores are scheduled one semester in General Speech, during which time they take the oral communication proficiency examination. For the performance sample to be assessed the student selects in advance one of these formats: an interview, a topic, a question, or a prepared speech.

Students are scored holistically by a diagnostic speech team, each composed of two speech instructors and/or staff members who have at least a minor in speech. In the event that the diagnostic team cannot make a decision on a student or a discrepancy score is given, a third person is drawn from another diagnostic team to evaluate a tape recording of the student's performance. No diagnostic team member is allowed to score students who are presently attending his or her home school.

Students are required to pass a proficiency examination only one time. Therefore, by the end of the tenth grade most students can complete all competency requirements. This permits the more able students to devote full time to advanced study and allows those who have learning difficulties to have intensive assistance to help them achieve at least minimum mastery prior to graduation.

The data processing and recording system produces and maintains full information regarding the progress of each student toward the mastery of all skills and sub-skills in the minimum competency program. In appropriate selections of content and format, this information is transmitted to the student, parents, teachers and other personnel involved in diagnostic, remedial or counseling services.

The primary purpose of the progress assessment is to obtain data that can be helpful in directing instruction to the specific needs of individuals. Using the analytical information from the minimum competency tests, the staff has developed a variety of remedial programs to help those students who have deficiencies that have been identified. Included are small remedial classes, learning centers, reading laboratories, and tutoring service. Psychologists, social workers, nurses and other special staff are busy at all grade levels helping to determine and, if possible, remedy causes for difficulties in learning.

Observable Effects of the Program

Although there has not been a definitive evaluation of the Gary minimum competency program, there are some observable indicators of its effects in the schools. Some of these relate to the educational process, while others suggest probable increments in learning. A comprehensive external evaluation within the next two or three years very likely would produce valuable information for the Gary schools and perhaps, for education in general.

It is easy for an inside-outside observer to note that the program has had a major impact on the teamwork approach within the staff. This was facilitated by the existence of a common concern about the need to improve student competence in the basic skills. The Board policy set the stage for a system-wide plan that brought a variety of staff members closer together to work on tasks that became increasingly well defined and meaningful. A few examples of expanded staff interaction and teamwork will be cited.

In the elementary schools, curriculum committees prepared preliminary lists of objectives in grade level sets for each of the skill areas. Then all the teachers for each grade and those for the next grade participated in selecting those skills considered to be essential for pupils to master as a foundation for continued achievement. For example, within each of the elementary schools, this procedure brought first grade and second grade teachers together to select skills that should be mastered in the first grade for successful continuation of learning in the second grade. This occurred for each grade level. The process was especially revealing when sixth grade teachers from elementary schools met with seventh grade teachers from middle schools to rate the sixth grade objectives.

Another observation of enhanced teamwork is the involvement of supportive services staff with teachers. For example, research personnel traditionally have worked with teachers, but with criterion-referenced tests and the increased focus on individual achievement inherent in the policy, they have become much more involved directly with teachers in activities such as defining objectives, developing assessment instruments and procedures, providing analytical data to show achievement on specific skills by individuals and groups, monitoring the validity and reliability of the tests, considering the appropriateness of criteria for mastery, interpreting test results, and evaluating various strategies for instruction and remediation.

Counselors also have become more deeply involved with instruction. In each of the secondary schools, a counselor serves as coordinator of the minimum competency program. While maintaining their relationship with other counselors, the coordinators are in direct functional contact with personnel involved in the minimum competency program within the school and at the general service center.

Inherent in the operation of the program is early detection of students who have learning problems with the basic skills, which usually is indicative of their difficulties in other parts of the curriculum. This systematic disclosure of such students opens the door immediately for counselors, psychologists, social workers, health practitioners, and other specialists to work individually and as teams with teachers in several levels and forms of diagnosis and remediation.

The expanded teamwork, in addition to expediting and improving current services for students, also seems to help staff members grow professionally as they share their knowledge and skills.

One other observable effect is noted. The policy and practice disclose a strong emphasis on staff communication with parents. This includes information about the requirements introduced by the new policy, program opportunities to help students with essential learning, and the current status of family members in the checkpoint and proficiency testing.

Teachers and counselors are more frequently involved with parents regarding specific student learning problems. When a need is indicated, the problem is pursued in greater depth with the social worker, psychologist, or other special services personnel. In a few cases, teachers and supervisors have prepared home study materials to help with the learning process.

Although the observable effects of the minimum competency program on the educational process may appear to be significant, the primary concern is with the impact that it may have on student achievement. Very likely there will be several years before a definitive response to this concern can be obtained. Time is needed to allow the significance of current expanded learning experiences in the lower grades to be assessed for effects on performance in the senior year. Also, in subsequent years, any Hawthorne effect that may be present now very likely will decline. In view of these considerations, at this point some of the evaluative data related to graduating seniors will be reviewed.

The graduation requirement is based on results of criterion-referenced tests developed, administered, and assessed by local personnel, with some external technical assistance. For the outside observer there is an immediate question about standards. The local staff also continues to seek the most appropriate resolution for that question. If the standards are set too high, the number of students failing at the several checkpoints would be so large that effective remedial services would be impossible with available resources. The approach has been to begin with what seem to be realistic standards and examine them repeatedly. Such examinations have produced extensive discussion but have not induced a change in the initial mastery levels for the checkpoint and proficiency tests.

The number of seniors passing the proficiency tests required for graduation is perhaps the best indicator of progress based on the local standards.

These numbers expressed as per cents follow:

	1977	1978	1979
Reading	96.6	97.9	98.4
Mathematics	96.4	97.7	98.0
Writing	-	97.4	96.6

In some of the discussions of these results, it has been suggested that the per cents are too high; or, in other words, the standards are too low. However, it seems significant to note that when the 1979 graduates were sophomores in 1977, only 83.9% of the class passed the test in reading and 55.8% in writing; and as juniors in 1978, 93.9% of the class passed the test in reading, 88.4% in mathematics and 87.2% in writing. Although the composition of the class changed somewhat through the years, these data suggest substantial achievement at grade levels where basic skills normally are not stressed. It represents a strong commitment of students, faculties, and parents to fulfill the intent of the 1974 minimum competency policy.

Another approach to assessment is to examine the validity of the locally-developed tests by comparing their content with competency expected in post-high school activities or by correlating them with a nationally standardized test. Neither of these comparisons has been made definitively, but here are two items that may be suggestive: The mathematics proficiency test was examined confidentially by the technical staff in a large local industry. The response was that if students perform successfully on this test, they should have no problem with the mathematics required for any of the company's entry jobs.

The Stanford Test of Academic Skills was administered to seniors in 1974 and again in 1977. The median grade equivalent for the graduating class in reading increased from 8.6 in 1974 to 9.8 in 1977, while in mathematics, the increase was from 9.0 in 1974 to 9.6 in 1977. The class enrollment was 2143 in 1974 and 2124 in 1977.

As indicated previously, a comprehensive evaluation, using proper controls and a variety of evidence from internal and external sources, should precede any conclusions regarding the program's effects on learning.

Concerns and Suggested Cautions

Some of the concerns and cautions suggested by the inside-outside view of the Gary minimum competency program relate to curriculum, costs, testing and school climate. There are other issues that could be considered when the movement or through post-high school study.

Utilizing the teamwork procedures enhanced by the minimum competency program, the staff has defined curricula and standards for ordinary and advanced levels in each of the competency II fields. With expanded guidance and counseling services, members of the class of 1983, as freshmen this year, have made tentative selections of fields and are taking initial courses in preparation for the new graduation requirement.

Another concern is that a school system introducing a minimum competency program be aware of the added cost. Based on a careful estimate, the additional cost for the development in Gary was $7,522 for the first year, $321,557 the second year, $644,932 the third year, and $724,516 the fourth year. The major costs are for additional teachers to provide small remedial classes, coordinators within the secondary schools and aides for the laboratories. These additional costs do not include federal funds that were used for the competency program rather than for other purposes.

The major concern about assessment is that the tests are valid, reliable and fair; and that there are sufficient forms of each test to permit repeated measurement for continued remediation. Planners also should avoid having tests take too much time for students and staff. This suggests careful examination of the total assessment program to maintain an optimum complementary relationship between instruction and testing for various purposes.

One of the most sensitive and damaging conditions that could emerge in a minimum competency program is a climate in which staff members feel threatened and students view the requirement as punitive. Possible consequences of personal reactions in this kind of climate are obvious. Staff teamwork with a focus on aiding each student through effective learning experiences can help avoid a negative climate, and with the systematic monitoring of learning, teachers are more likely to receive the kind of assistance that has immediate application in the performance of their responsibilities. Students must be made to understand that the total effort is directed toward helping to make sure that they leave high school with at least minimum proficiency for subsequent demands.

The final suggested caution is to allow ample time for planning before beginning the operation of a program. After objectives are carefully defined and assessment instruments constructed, they should be examined in several ways for any defects. For example, a trial administration of the test items with samples of students may identify cases of ambiguity, bias, or inappropriate levels of complexity. Likewise the review should assure that the staff, students, and parents have full understanding of all aspects of the program as it relates to them.

In viewing the Gary program as it has been presented, another observer may be concerned about the need for the graduation requirement. There are minimum competency programs similar to the one that has been described with the exception of the requirement for the high school diploma. The observation of the Gary development suggests that inclusion of the graduation requirement enhances a program's priority among staff, students, parents and funding sources. It directs renewed attention to promotional policies in elementary and secondary schools along with other strategies to help assure that the system does not allow a student to move up through the grades without continuously demonstrating reasonable mastery of the minimum skills. Comparative studies of minimum competency programs with and without the graduation requirement may produce useful insight and direction for new developments.

SYMPOSIUM ON MINIMUM COMPETENCY

Minimum Competency Testing: A Workable Approach

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The purpose of this paper is to share with you some of the practical, down-to-earth experiences we in Denver have been through in the 18 years that we have had a minimum competencies testing program.

First, I will describe in some detail the Proficiency and Review testing program as it unfolded in Denver and answer the seven questions posed by Henry M. Brickel in a paper prepared for the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education regarding the development of a minimum competency testing program.

These questions will be answered relative to the development of the Denver Public Schools testing program.

Second, I will describe a test development project that is now in progress in the Denver Public Schools. This project involves the development of what we call Checkpoint Tests. These instruments are minimum competency-like tests to be used at the 3rd and 6th grade levels. They are, in fact, an extension downward of the Proficiency and Review Tests.

Minimum Competency tesing is one of the primary issues in education today. In the past two or three years, my office has received well over 3,000 inquiries about our Proficiency and Review Test.

Minimum competency testing as it is used here refers to the testing of a student over a specifically defined set of material and requiring a stated level of achievement of the material before certification of mastery. Such an assessment is usually used relative to a pupil's promotion, advancement, or graduation. It is a product of the back-to-the basics movement.

The public is telling the schools that they want more and better teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics. The tenth annual Gallup Educationa Poll indicated that by a two to one majority, Americans feel that children should be promoted from grade to grade only if they can pass examinations. It is clear that the public may no longer continue to be completely satisfied with traditional ways or promotion or of awarding diplomas.

One way to determine if a student has demonstrated specific competencies is to give him or her a test, set standards or mastery levels, and expect the student to reach them.

Denver is one school system in the United States which currently operates a testing program designed to help assure that high school graduates possess minimum competency in four basic areas--arithmetic, spelling, grammar, and reading comprehension. If a senior does not pass all four tests, he receives no diploma; he is given, instead, a certificate of attendance.

This tesing program is called Proficiency and Review; it has been operating in Denver since 1960. However, the planning for the tests began two years earlier.

This program will be briefly described and answers to the seven questions relative to the development of such a program given. It must be realized, however, that these questions are being answered in retrospect. At the time of development there was not the degree of formalization of the process as now exists.

In 1958 a public opinion survey of 400 business and industrial employers in the Denver metropolitan area revealed that some questions were being raised about the validity of the high school diploma. A few graduates, it was believed, lacked competence in the basic skills. The superintendent and the board of education agreed that a demonstration of competence in basic skills should become a graduation requirement.

QUESTION NUMBER 1:	What competencies to measure?
ANSWER:	Direction was provided in large part by the community. The schools responded to a perceived need expressed by a segment of the community served. In Denver's case the competencies to be measured were defined broadly by the results of a citizen survey. They were refined by teachers, academic supervisors, and administrators serving on a committee whose responsibility was to oversee the development of the test battery.

A most original and fascinating set of competence based requirements was developed by the schools and citizens of Craig City, Alaska. The town is located on an island that serves a wide area having rugged climate and terrain.

Along with usual requirements in reading, writing, and math, Craig City citizens added competencies appropriate to their needs. High school graduates must be able to float for two minutes, perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, read a marine chart and answer questions relating to directions, water depth, rock and reef indentification, aids to mavigation. Craig City's requirements may be the best example in existence of combining local and national skills necessary for success in adulthood, and/or survival.

In 1959 the Proficiency and Review Tests of Denver Public Schools were developed in cooperation with the California Test Bureau. The tests were designed to have four parts: Numerical, Spelling, Language, and Reading Proficiency.

QUESTION NUMBER 2: How to test?

ANSWER: In view of the large numbers of pupils to be tested and the foreseen need to do some retesing and to repeat the process each year, a paper and pencil instrument was considered as most appropriate and practical.

In 1960 these tests were administered to seniors, some of whom failed one or more parts. Remedial programs were established in the high schools to tutor those pupils who had failed one or more of the tests. A voluntary summer school program was established to provide remedial instruction in the basic skills areas, and the tests were administered again. Only three percent of the seniors failed to obtain a diploma, receiving a certificate of attendance instead.

Two more years of experience produced approximately the same results. It was then decided to give the first administration of the tests to students during their first semester in eleventh grade; this would provide additional time for remediation.

During the school year of 1967-1968, an evaluation of the Proficiency and Review Tests was conducted by the research department. It was found that the tests may have been selecting on factors other than strictly cognitive. Some pupils, realizing the importance of passing this test, would "freeze" and score lower than their previous academic experience would indicate they might.

As a result of that evaluation, the recommendation was made that the test be given much earlier in the pupils' tenure than 11th grade so that more time could be spent helping pupils to overcome their problems.

At present, the Proficiency and Review Tests are administered in December and April of each year in grade nine with make-up in ten through twelve.

Pupils who fail one or more sections are programmed into established instructional programs in the basic skills areas to assist them in overcoming deficiencies.

QUESTION NUMBER 3:	When to test?
ANSWER:	As a result of eight years of experience and some careful evaluation, it was determined the appropriate time to test pupils with this particular examination was in the ninth grade.

These tests are used to help teachers and administrators identify students who do not meet locally established achievements levels in basic educational skills. Once identified, these students are given remedial work or placed in review programs. These tests are appropriate for administration to students in secondary schools during the early part of the ninth grade or beyond.

Denver's school system follows a Proficiency and Review program routine of--

1. Initial testing of all students at ninth grade level, using all four of the Proficiency and Review subtests
2. A period of review or remedial work for those students who fail to attain the required level on one or more subtests and are therefore considered to be deficient in onr or more skill areas

3. Retesting with an alternate form of the test. The students take only the subtest or tests which they "failed" on the initial testing.
4. A repetition of the cycle for students who continue to fail.

The individual student is the focal point of the entire program. He is being helped to understand any weakness in the basic skills and to overcome them.

QUESTION NUMBER 4: What to do with the incompetent?

ANSWER: Identify weakness and reteach concepts. If a pupil neve does pass all four sections of the Proficiency and Review Tests, he is given a certificate of attendance, not a diploma.

QUESTION NUMBER 5: One minimum or many?

ANSWER: One minimum is defined for all pupils. All pupils whi receive a diploma must meet the same standard.

Numerical Proficiency Test

The Numerical Proficiency Test is designed to measure ability in four fundamental arithmetical operations and in the basic concepts. The fundamental operations are applied to whole numbers, fractions, decimals, and denominate numbers. The test items concerned with other basic concepts involve conversion from one to another of fractions, decimal numerals, and percents; expression of large numbers and monetary amounts in numerals; computation of percentages; and determination of relative sizes of numbers in lists of fractions and decimal numerals.

The 50 items in the test are divided among the five areas: addition, subtraction, meanings, multiplication, and division. All items are multiple choice items and have five alternatives.

Spelling Proficiency Test

The Spelling Proficiency Test is designed to measure the ability to recognize the correct spelling of words. All words used were checked against the New Iowa Spelling Scale and commonly used spelling textbooks. Most of the words can be classified at "eighth grade level," although a few are easier and a few more difficult. The common types of spelling errors are represented: doubling or failing to double consonants; the omission of a "silent letter"; vowel substitution; the "ie rule"; and phonetic spelling. The words are presented in 50 multiple chocie items of four words, with the fifth choice being "None," that is, no errors.

Language Proficiency Test

The Language Proficiency Test is designed to measure the ability to recognize correctly written English. The test contains two selections which represent compositions that might have been written by students. It is the examinee's task to proofread these selections. In the 50 item test, each line of the selections represents one test item. The student is to decide whether the line is correct or contains an error in punctuation, capitalization, or grammar.

Reading Proficiency Test

The Reading Proficiency Test is divided into two sections: reading comprehension and vocabulary. The first section is designed to measure comprehension as reflected in the ability to recognize details stated in a reading passage and in the ability to make simple inferences. The vocabulary section measures knowledge or word meaning.

The reading comprehension section consists of three short reading passages with each followed by eight statements. The examinee is to read a passage and then decide whether each statement agrees with the preceding passage, disagrees with it, or cannot be inferred from it. The ability to recognize stated details is tested by approximately two-thids of the items; the ability simple inferences is tested by about one-third of them.

The vocabulary section of the Reading Proficiency Test contains 26 test items. Each item consists of a lead word followed by a list of four words. The examinee's task is to select from the list the one word that means the same, or about the same, as the lead word.

At present the Proficiency and Review Tests are administered in December and April of each year in grade nine. Make-up examinations are also given twice a year in grades 10 and 11. Pupils in grade 12 who have not passed all sections of the examination are given several opportunities to take the examination.

Parents are notified at least twice a year, by way of report cards, of the standing of their child relative to the passing of each of the four subtests.

Pupils who fail are provided skill analysis reports stating the areas in which they are weak. These reports serve as bases for the development of remedication programs.

If at the end of the twelfth grade a pupil still has not successfully completed the Proficiency and Review Tests, he may attend special classes in summer school.

Any pupil who receives a certificate of attendance (due to not completing the Proficiency and Review requirement) may return, at any time, to the Department of Development and Evaluation and take those subtests he has not passed; once he passes, he receives a diploma, providing all other graduation requirements have been met.

QUESTION NUMBER 6: Minimums for students or schools?

ANSWER: Pupils in the Denver Public Schools are expected to meet a minimum standard in this program. School

> minimums are, however, not difficult to work into the picture.
>
> If one school, for example, has 85 percent of its pupils passing the mathematics test and another has only 35 percent of its pupils passing, some judgments relative to school performance can be made. These judgments, of course, must be made in light of information that goes beyond simple pass-fail ratios.

As previously indicated, the California Test Bureau helped develop the test battery.

One major goal set for the development of the Proficiency and Review series was that about 70 percent of American ninth graders be able to answer 70 percent or more of the items on any one test.

Analyses were made of the initial Proficiency and Review series which had been administered to large groups of students in grades 8-12. Then four experimental forms were developed that met not only the requirement enumerated earlier, but also content validity and item discrimination critieria. Some items met the standards set and were retained unchanged. Others were changed to meet the standards by making revisions.

The four experimental forms were then administered to 1,867 eighth grade students in Califronia, Colorado, Georgia, and Washington. Items from thse four forms which met the established requirements for difficulty and discrimination power were used to develop Forms F, G, and H of Series II (two).

For each of the four tests in the Proficiency and Review, the score is merely the number of items answered correctly by the examinee. Users were urged to set their own passing score or standards.

There were no norms established for the tests. Again, users were advised to prepare local norms for use in their own schools or districts.

QUESTION NUMBER 7: How high the minimum?

ANSWER: Denver tested a sample of pupils with the instruments and made a determination of where to set the cutting score on the basis of examining the frequency distribution of scores and identifying scores that reflected a separation of the distribution into a low scoring group and a high scoring group. Over the years this core has moved upward somewhat and is now set at 32 out of 50 items on each subtest.

Minimums were set in a pragmatic manner by school personnel. Those involved in making recommendations were teachers, academic specialists, principals, and central administrators working as a committee. The final decision, of course, was in the hands of the superintendent and the board of education.

By way of summary the answers to the seven questions relative to Denver's experience are--

1. What competencies are measured?

   Answer: Basic skills consisting of reading, arithmetic, spelling, and language usage are measured.

2. How to measure the competencies?

   Answer: Paper and pencil instrument is used.

3. When to measure the competencies?

   Answer: Competency is measured at the 9th grade level.

4. One minimum or many?

   Answer: Only one minimum.

5. How high the minimum?

   Answer: Minimum passing level is 32 items correct out of 50 on each test.

6. Minimums for students or schools?

   Answer: Minimums are for students.

7. What to do with those not meeting the minimum?

   Answer: Identify pupil need and reteach those concepts.

In general, we are pleased with the results of this approach and are now in the process of developing "checkpoint" tests to be given to children at the end of 3rd and 6th grades.

These tests, like the Proficiency and Review, will be tied to instructional objectives in the areas of reading, arithmetic, spelling, and language usage and will be integrated with the Proficiency and Review testing program. They will be used to identify pupil strengths and weaknesses.

Pupils who evidence difficulty in any of these areas will be provided with special assistance to overcome thier problems. There is no intention to use these examinations to hold pupils back in either grades three or six if they do poorly.

Answers to the seven questions relative to the "Checkpoint" test follow.

1. What competencies should be meausred?

   Answer: Reading, arithmetic, spelling, and language usage will be measured.

Professional staff has selected the competencies based on citizen input regarding their expressed concerns relative to basic skills instruction.

Professional staff committee composed of teachers, academic specialists, principals, central administrators, and research and testing personnel will determine how to measure the competencies.

2. How should competencies be measured?

   Answer: Paper and pencil instrument will be used.

3. When should competencies be measured?

   Answer: Competencies will be measured at the end of 3rd and 6th grades.

4. One minimum or many?

   Answer: One minimum will be used to determine if a pupil needs additional help (remediation). A higher cutting score may be used in conjunction with emerging district programs for gifted and talented pupils.

5. How high the minimum?

   Answer: Not determined at this point; however, professional staff committee named to oversee test development will make recommendations with advice and consent from the superintendent and board of education.

6. Minimums for students or schools?

   Answer: There will be a minimum for pupils.

7. What to do with non-mastery pupils?

   Answer: Identification of any specific skill weaknesses a pupil may have and reteach concepts.

Testing programs such as this one can serve a variety of purposes, but mostly, they should be used to help pupils; they should be as positive in nature as possible. We are all aware of the possibility of misuse of tests and test data. A school district contemplating a minimum competency testing program should strive to minimize potential misuses or abuses and to maximize the benefits to pupils involved in minimum competency testing programs.

COMPETENCY TESTING, PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS:
A LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

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While educators and the courts continue to wrestle with the complex issues that promote or hinder educational opportunity, new issues keep pushing to the front. The spectre of educational malpractice represents one such issue. At the center of this issue is the question of whether the educational profession can be held liable for judgments that result in a student's failure to succeed academically.

This professional judgment controversy reached a sort of crossroads in the 1970's. Declining student test scores and a lessening of confidence in school officials contributed to the dilemma. Thus, the whole idea of educational malpractice now represents a shift from the issues of student care and safety to educational outcome. Although the courts have yet to rule for plaintiffs in malpractice suits against educators, as they have in the medical and legal professions, litigation involving educators is nevertheless increasing. In fact, during the last decade, almost every teacher and administrator has begun to ask what educational malpractice means for the practicing educator.

Although the malpractice issue received great impetus from the medical and legal professions, other professions are becoming immersed in this complex area. This has contributed to an increase in the number of lawsuits brought against educators. One argument frequently applied by analogy to education is that the profession must become more accountable for the delivery of its services.

Accountability in public schools is, in fact, a topic frequently discussed by state legislators, the lay public, and the public school officials themselves. "The word has come, through a peculiar metamorphosis, to be associated with the imposition of management practices borrowed from business, with the filling out of detailed forms to be submitted to faceless bureaucrats, and with a societal suspicion that education needs more control and supervision in order to become more (effective)."1 But what, more specifically, is the nature of this current insistence upon accountability? Erosion of community support, growing financial burdens, distorted priorities, and public concern for rapidly worsening social problems for which the schools are perceived as significantly responsible -- all of these factors are more contibutory to the current demand for educational accountability.2 The critical questions of what accountability is, how it can be implemented, and what effects will it have on educational organizations remain to be answered.

Rather than ignore this demand for educational accountability, educators should begin to analyze the extent to which their policies, programs, and practices can be modified both to increase student achievement and to effect accountability.

One such approach currently being considered by some educators and implemented by others, to increase a school's accountability for its students prior to graduation, is competency testing.

A comparatively recent concept, tested competency as a high school graduation requirement to help educators meet the public's demand for teaching and learning accountability has yet to be fully evaluated. The demand for minimal competency mastery has, however, emerged in part because a substantial number of students receiving high school diplomas have been proven to be functionally illiterate. Thus, citizens, legislators, and some educators see competency testing as a way of assuring "that the diploma will cease to be a meaningless, counterfeit document."3 Meanwhile, however, some critics view this approach as a more sophisticated way to deny minorities equal educational opportunity.

Educators thus find themselves in a quandary. On the one hand, the education profession and society in general no longer tolerate functionally illiterate high school graduates. On the other hand, educators cannot implement competency testing programs before they address the key issues that determine whether such programs can succeed while avoiding an adverse impact upon a large portion of the student population.

This current interest in competency testing may, of course, simply be another fad. Nevertheless, competency testing programs have already been implemented in more than forty states, and almost all of the remaining states have studied or are studying these programs.

Performance contracting, statewide assessment, and management by objectives represent only a few of the techiques citizens and government recommend or use to make educational organizations more accountable; yet, these techniques provide no clear definition of accountability for those in the education professions.

Proficiency Testing: A Recent Invention

Unlike general accountability, proficiency testing or competency testing is a recent "invention" supposedly designed to meet the public demand for accountability. It purports to meet this demand by placing the responsibility for achieving high school literacy on the educational delivery system rather than on the learner. But instead of placing the responsibility on the educational delivery system, competency testing appears to be simply a more sophisticated tactic for holding students and teachers accountable. William Ryan refers to this phenomenon as "blaming the victim." "Victim blaming is cloaked in kindness and concern, and bears all the trappings and statistical furbelows of scientism; it is obscured by a perfumed haze of humanitarianism."4 The point here, of course, is that at least some students may be held responsible for thier own miseducation.

Rather than discuss the potential competency testing has for improving the delivery of educational services, this article focuses on those techniques and strategies that may be of value in improving student performance. Accordingly, I plan to review some of the legal issues to be addressed if problems are to be reduced.

The Law, Litigation and Competency Testing: An Emerging Phenomenon

Competency testing has not been without critics who challenge such issues as "the fairness of testing procedures vis-a-vis instruction; the biases for or against certain racial, ethnic, and special needs populations; failure to provide necessary remedial services; and a lack of sufficient time to implement procedures."5 Thus far, the lawsuits that emerge from such criticism tend to concern either the constitutionality of competency testing programs or the breaching of certain administrative practices. A denial of equal protection under the law, violations of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the violation of a student's procedural and substantive rights have also been subjects for litigation.

If such litigation is to be avoided, educators must obviously take steps to protect the statutorial and constitutional rights of students.

Many questions focus on the extent to which competency tests discriminate against minority students or students dominant in a language other than English. Such discrimination would, after all, preclude some of these students from receiving a high school diploma. This claim is based on the argument that a disproportionate number of minority students test below the minimum standards.6 School officials comtemplating or implementing minimum competency testing programs must anticipate these objections. Fair, culturally neutral testing has become an important defense to any challenge of discrimination under Title VI.

Significantly, U. S. District Court Judge George Carr recently held that Florida's competency test can no longer be used as a requirement for a high school diploma until all facets of school segregation had disappeared. The Judge further held that the students should have four years to function in a unitary system before the requirement is implemented. Moreover, when test results contribute to the resegregation of students, one must take care to ensure that the constitutional rights of these students are not breached.7

This issue of resegregation was in fact, addressed to some degree by the United States Supreme Court in Gaston County, North Carolina v. United States8 when it considered whether education or literacy test requisites served to deny the vote to persons of a certain race or color. Justice Harlan, speaking for the majority of the Court, noted that making education available equitably would prepare Black youths to meet the literacy standard when they reached voting age. "Although," Justice Harlan said, "the equalization of opportunites for parents is of little value, (we) cannot escape the sad truth that throughout the years, Gaston County systematically deprived its (Black) citizens of the educational opportunites it granted to its white citizens. 'Impartial' administration of the literacy test today would serve only to perpetuate these inequities in a different form."9

This "prior effects" principle was expanded further in McNeal v. Tate County School District.10 Citing Singleton11 and Lemon12 the court held that tests used to determine ability groups must have been used in a district that had functioned as a unitary system for two or more years. The point here is that a district must have had sufficient time to assure that underachievers were not produced by past educational inequities.

This point was addressed in Diana v. California State Board of Education,13 when Spanish speaking children were placed in a class of mentally retarded students as a result of scores on a Stanford-Binet test that had been administered in Enlgish. Tested by a bilingual psychologist and permitted to answer in either English or Spanish, the children achieved test scores that improved an average of fifteen points. The concerned parties reached agreement, thereby avoiding a Court decision. The agreement stipulated that henceforth placement tests of students dominant in a language other than English would utilize both the student's dominant language and English.

In Lau v. Nichols14 the Court prohibited school officials from administering culturally or linguistically biased tests. In addition, failure to design a test or testing program that took into account the needs of students dominant in a language other than English opened the door to suit.

Another point of interest was raised in Washington v. Davis.15 Here, the United States Supreme Court noted that the disproportionate impact of a testing program on one racial group "is not irrelevant, but it is not the sole touchstone of an invidious racial discrimination forbidden by the Constitution."16 In other words, a test that has significant impact upon a particular racial or ethnic group does not in itself necessarily violate the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. To prove unconstitutionality, a plaintiff must demonstrate that the intent of the testing program was to discriminate.

Caution should also be urged on educators contemplating the implementation of ability-grouping or tracking. The courts have yet to say that all such "classifications" are unconstitutional, even when a plaintiff has been able to establish a prima facie case. But, establishing a prima facie case requires a plaintiff to prove (as one did in Hobson v. Hansen)17 that the testing program included the following characteristics:

1. A racial imbalance existed between tracks or ability groups;
2. The standardized ability test used to classify students were cultural biased against Blacks and other low income students; and
3. A woeful lack of compensatory or remedial programs had the effect of keeping lower track students on the lower track.18

Advocates for handicapped students argue that competency testing may amount to another hurdle that denies a segment of the student population complete access to educational opportunities.

Substantive and Procedural Due Process

Certainly everyone agrees that care must be taken to avoid violating the rights of students. To fulfill the requirements of procedural due process as it relates to competency testing, educators must make certain a student has received proper notification and had sufficient time to protect his or her interest.19 Generally speaking, prior notice and a hearing must be provided before an individual can be deprived of a constitutionally protected right.

Educational Malpractice

In the past, educators have found themselves involved in litigation concerning issues of student care and safety. The whole idea of educational malpractice represents a shift from such issues to educational outcomes. Although the New York Court of Appeals recently ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in a suit involving educators, the question is whether competency testing may provide yet another opportunity for individuals to seek judicial relief for the apparent failure of educators to discharge their duties. Such cases as Wood v. Strickland20 and Monell v. Department of Social Services, New York City21 signal a growing inclination to hold educators and other public officials accountable for discharging their duties.

If educators are to avoid claims of educational malpractice they must learn from the experiences of other districts before instituting competency testing programs. And they must take those steps necessary to meet the needs of students as well as minimize needless litigation.

The critics notwithstanding, competency testing may actually "help educators and others"22 to benefit from the best the public schools have to offer. Therefore, educators must do those things that work.

Therefore, school authorities must develop a process that ensures that each member of the education profession possesses an understanding of the district's competency testing program. This means that teachers and administrators alike must have an opportunity to participate in carefully planned in-service programs designed to familiarize them with the intricacies of the testing program. With such staff developed activities as these, members of the education staff will be better prepared to administer the tests and interpret results.

A careful monitoring of the development of the tests to be used in a competency program requires planning, patience, and the complete support of school officials. Cultural and linguistic bias, test validity, and test reliability must be carefully isolated or accounted for. One approach to accomplishing this screening is the establishmnet of a review committee comprised of experts from school districts, institutions of higher education, the state department of education, private agencies, and other appropriate personnel concerned with the construction of the tests. Some districts and state departments have appointed officers or groups to focus on specific aspects of test development.

The impact competency testing will have on a district's handicapped students should be anticipated before the program is implemented. This procedure should minimize any claims that the testing program places an undue burden on this segment of the school population.

Parents as well as members of the larger community have a right to be informed, consulted, and involved in the development of a district's competency testing program. To make this goal a reality, school officials might consider establishing parent and community study groups for the purpose of allowing parents to communicate openly with school officials while limiting parents' actual involvement to the examination of the district's testing program.

One point that generally receives only lip service is that financial and personnel support for remediation should go beyond just the identification of areas of instructional needs. The point here is educators have an obligation to provide instruction support so that academic need can be met through the delivery of actual educational services. Gradually phasing in a competency testing program may enable a district to meet the needs of students more effectively. But school officials need time to plan and refine student learning programs -- an extremely difficult task when the entire school population is involved all at once.

Closely related to this point is that students who do not have an opportunity to benefit from the district's support services should not be penalized by the testing program. In fact, schools officials often fail to ensure that students who will be affected by the testing program fully understand it.

Conclusion

> Unless the advances of science are used with discrimination by scientists engaged in behavior research--as well as by other professions--the constructive and productive uses of these advances may be drastically and unnecessarily restricted by a fearful community.23

The word I use to describe the future for competency testing is "hazy." But this much is certain: Until educators develop guidelines that balance the right to fairness and the need for student assessment, society will insist upon this balance and probably bring it about on its own terms. Thus, the education community should take the lead "through its own codes, its own attitudes, and its own behavior."24 Otherwise, the legislature and the courts, through statutes and judicial decisions, will go right on establishing guidelines for educators regardless of the rationality of those guidelines.

As technological innovation continues to force educators to prove that their actions do not invade an individual's legislated and common law rights. This pressure will increase simply because society now finds itself caught in a struggle between the rights of professional educators and the rights of students. Accordingly, educators should continue to examine the effects of such testing on student learning.

Errors in judgment will force educators increasingly to assume defensive postures as they attempt to prove that their actions do not violate students' rights. In any case, pressure on them will almost certainly increase, simply because the educational community will find itself caught between a "product liability" concept, on one hand, and a growing number of vocal parents dissatisfied with some aspect of an instructional program (or with a particular teacher) on the other. Society's taste for malpractice litigation has already expanded the market for professional liability insurance. We need some form of student assessment, but we have yet to decide whether minimum competency testing is the answer. Since this question does remain, educators must carefully scrutinize minimum competency testing programs if the inevitable legal challenges to this testing are to be withstood. More concretely, both educators and legislators should be willing to learn from the few available cases as well as from those that emerge so that we can minimize injury to our students.

The real challenge before us, then, is to develop assessment tools and indicators of what students actually can do in relation to the clearly articulated goals we develop with and for them. Programs can be considered "competency based" only when we direct curriculum development, student assessment, instruction, grouping, and promotion to these goals.25

NOTES

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MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING:

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS FOR THE EIGHTIES

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Public interest in Minimal Competency testing, while having its roots firmly planted in the nineteen-seventies, will come to full flower only in the eighties. As we have seen so abundantly demonstrated in the seventies, this public interest will continue to make itself felt in the educational community at every level from the federal to the individual classroom. It is our responsibility, as educators, to profit from our hard-won knowledge of the past decade's activities in minimal competency testing. It is only by recognizing both the positive and negative impact of this movement that we will be able to devise the best possible solutions for the eighties.

Background

During the second half of the 1970s, the American public began to voice dissatisfaction with the processes and outcomes of the educational system. The precise origins of this intense interest are not readily apparent, but it is clear that they are the product of a complex mix of sociological, economic, and political factors. We can see, however, that public interest in minimal competency testing has assumed an existence quite separate from that of the traditional interests of the professional educators. The public concern has focussed on required graduation tests as an indication of the overall quality of both elementary and secondary education, and has called for wide-ranging reforms and accountability mechanisms directed at public control of professional educators. On the other hand, educators themselves have attempted with varying degrees of success, to emphasize a broader view of education, and to convey to the general public their feelings about the importance of understanding the educational process, as well as its end-products. As the 1970s draw to a close, we see the reversal of the status of testing that prevailed at the beginning of the century: at this time, the general public is largely convinced of the value of testing, whereas, the education community has begun to question many testing practices. The result of these discrepant perceptions of the problem and its solutions has been a great deal of friction between the world of professional education and the world of the general public. On the positive side of the experience, one might list a renewed public interest in the quality of education, a commitment to the importance of the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills by all students, the possibility of increased funding for related instructional activities and assessment, and a strong interest on the part of schools in providing assistance to the less able student. On the negative side, one might well list a tendency to view tests as a substitute for good instruction, deflection of interest and attention away from the more able student and from curriculum areas outside the "three R's," and a preference for assessing blame for failures rather than seeking constructive solutions.

Despite these conflicts and mixed outcomes, one can identify specific practices and programs within the area of minimal competency testing that illustrate the central issues of the movement and provide examples of how such issues can be resolved to the benefit of all concerned. In the discussion of issues and practices that follows, it is important to keep in mind that the problems posed by minimal competency testing and the solutions devised to deal with these problems do not in general, differ in substance from the traditional problems of education and educational measurement. Indeed, the recognition of this situation is in itself one of the new problems: we are inclined to forget that education has always concerned itself with such issues as community relations, maintenance of educational standards, promotion and graduation standards, meaningful testing, and proper curriculum emphases. The rhetoric that surrounds the minimal competency testing movement is perhaps new, but the underlying problems have been with us since the beginnings of American education. In the following discussion, I will attempt to identify the major measurement-related problems in minimal competency testing, give some examples of successful and unsuccessful responses to them, and suggest appropriate directions for the future.

Problem 1: Judgments and Data

Good minimum competency testing programs share the general attributes of good testing programs of any kind, such as attention to planning and management; but, in addition, they deal constructively with a small but important number of unique problems. Good measurement practice, in minimal competency testing as elsewhere, requires not only attention to the technical characteristics of the instruments, but a clear conception of the purposes of testing, the questions that test results are intended to answer, and the limitations that must be placed on the inferences to be drawn from the test results. Moreover, we must recognize that many of the issues faced by those who develop or implement minimal competency testing programs are not questions of measurement or measurement technology *per se*, but are rather questions of how particular agreed-upon societal values may best be served with the measurement technology currently available to us. All good minimal competency programs explicitly recognize the strong influence of values and judgments on their decision-making processes and the outcomes of such processes. The identifying characteristic of such programs is their simultaneous commitment to the rigors of a data-based activity and to the value structure that frames their judgments and interpretation of the data.

In the world of minimal competency testing, the pressure to satisfy public demands is strong. News media magnify the public interest to present direct and forceful challenges to the schools. But the form of the challenge is amorphous: the predominating message is dissatisfaction, but, upon closer examination, "with what" is not clear. The media present horrible examples, such as the perhaps apocryphal New Jersey high-school graduate whose seven-year-old sister had to read his diploma to him. But what are we to make of the presentation of such terrible cases? That this is a new phenomenon, the result of some horrendous mistake on the part of today's educators? Or that such cases have historically been with us, but that we will no longer tolerate them? The planning of a good minimal competency test program requires knowing which of these questions is on the floor before attempting to provide an answer. Given the two questions, "Are we as good as we were?" and "Are we as good as we should be?", the good, or even the adequate, minimal competency testing program seeks to collect different data for each. To discover if schools are as good as they should be clearly requires a series of value judgments. Judgments must be made about what an acceptable standard of education is, to whom such a standard should apply, and what the desired outcomes are for those who reach the standard and for those who do not. Once such judgments are made, data are collected to clarify progress toward the desired standards. I believe that good minimal competency testing programs concentrate on this question, whether the quality of education is as good as it should be, rather than focusing on comparisons with the real or imagined standards of the past. But the best programs articulate their value judgments clearly, provide rationales for each of these judgments, and collect objective data to document their current status and progress toward their goals.

The question of whether today's educational standards and products are the equal of those of the past is, I think, at once a less interesting question, and a more complex one to answer. Today's performance relative to that of the past is not illuminated by reference to specific individual failures, although this seems to be a prevalent form of "evidence" of declining standards and student performance. A serious attempt to compare student performance across time necessitates collection of data on comparable tasks performed by comparable groups of students across time. Such data are not readily available on the national level, and seem quite rare at the local level. In general, the problem of comparability of groups is insurmountable. Today's high school population includes the vast majority of the appropriate age group. Yet, many of us can remember when the majority of students did not attempt or did not complete high school. Certainly, the high school diploma "meant something" then; but the other side of the coin is that it "meant something" primarily because most people couldn't have one. Recent American history has valued the democratization of education very highly. Our rate of literacy now surpasses levels not even aspired to fifty or a hundred years ago. It is a measure of our rising expectations that literacy, which we now expect of every citizen, is no longer judged simply by the ability to sign one's name; it is now defined by the ability to write and comprehend at a fairly complex level, variously set at the fourth, or sixth, or eighth, or tenth grade level. So how may we judge if today's education is "better than" or "worse than" yesterday's? On closer inspection, this question cannot be answered by data alone. In order to answer it, we must weigh the relative value of meaningful certification of student performance on the one hand, and of extending the educational franchise to every citizen on the other.

In any event, carefully structured, non-arbitrary, and defensible judgments must be coupled with appropriate objective data to provide the framework for a good minimal competency testing program. I think the nineteen-eighties will bring an even heavier emphasis on data collection than we see now, and a more sophisticated understanding of the role played by values and judgments in evaluating student performance.

Problem 2: Making Time for Planning

In the context of public scrutiny and legislative pressures for immediate action, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of planning, or to be deterred by accusations that time needed for planning is really an attempt to delay taking action. To develop and implement a minimal competency testing program that is even minimally adequate requires a minimum of several years. The worst minimal competency testing programs call for immediate testing as a requirement for high school graduation. Early minimal competency legislation tended to call for such precipitate action, but the more recent legislation, perhaps in recognition of earlier disasters or near-disasters, has provided for more lead time.

Good minimal competency testing programs include planning for pilot studies. Ideally, these are studies of the meaning of minimal competency in this particular context, and of the desired goals and objectives of the program, as well as pilot studies of test instruments and actual student performance on these instruments. The state of South Carolina, for example, has just completed a planning stage, preparatory to actual minimal competency testing, in which objectives in the basic subjects were defined and then refined by the intense scrutiny of both professional educators and the general public. This process was a long, complete, and expensive one, but it is certain to contribute to a fairer, more efficient, and more appropriate minimal competency testing program.

In addition to clarifying goals and objectives, the planning phase must allow for pilot studies of test instruments and of setting standards on these instruments. Small samples of students may be sufficient for this purpose, but programs that have a realistic notion of how well their students will perform on a particular test, and of the probable consequences of setting a passing grade at a particular level, will certainly have fewer unpleasant surprises when their mandated minimal competency testing comes due.

The quality of a minimal competency testing program may also be judged by the age of the students affected. A program that affects first graders as well as high school seniors is a better program than one that affects only high school students. There are at least two issues here. One is the question of due process and the students' right to be made aware, as early in the schooling process as possible, of what requirements and expectations are to be made of them. The other is the question of the logic of the curriculum. The best educational programs, minimal competency or otherwise, are those that are based on a framework of continuity, and consistency of goals for growth in student accomplishment.

We have already seen the beginning of a move toward recognition of the importance of planning for good minimal competency testing programs. During the eighties, I think this notion will spread, and schools will be encouraged, or required, to apply the tenets of good minimal competency testing to students of all ages, and to demonstrate thoughtful planning for this activity.

Problem 3: Managing and Impact

Good management of minimal competency testing programs shares the characteristics of good management in general: attention to planning, monitoring, and follow-up, with intervention as required. Management of minimal competency testing programs has too often been limited to arranging for test administration. Good program management practice now recognizes the impact of minimal competency testing on the entire spectrum of educational activities and attempts to foresee potential trouble spots and plan accordingly. Managers must consider the positive and negative impacts of minimal competency testing on students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and other members of the community. Minimal competency testing may influence classroom grading practices; retention, graduation, and remediation rates; and curriculum. Communications among school staff, or between staff and students, may be affected. Good minimal competency testing management attempts to foresee those areas most likely to be affected by a particular minimal competency testing program, and attempts to minimize any ensuing negative effects.

Problem 4: Curriculum

The impact of minimal competency testing on curriculum is felt most directly at the classroom level. Teachers have been most vocal in expressing their concerns about minimal competency testing in three areas, which might be condensed into these questions: Should we be teaching what these tests test? Are we in danger of over-emphasizing the three R's? Will the minimum standard we set today become the minimum standards of the future?

To consider the first of these questions, we must first be clear that minimal competency tests, like other achievement tests, can be judged by their closeness of their relationship to the material being taught. This relationship has been obscured for some minimal competency tests because of the issue of including "survival skills," or practically-oriented, real-life materials in such tests. If tests include such material, common sense (and perhaps future legal actions) requires that students have been taught such material. Poor minimal competency tests stop there. Good minimal competency tests look beyond the surface of the stimulus material to the underlying, teachable skill. A good teacher doesn't teach "reading the T.V. guide; "a good teacher teaches "locating specific information," using the T.V. guide and other sources as stimulus material. In such a context of good instructional practice, the link between teaching and testing is clear and appropriate. At the present time, the responsibility for ensuring that minimal competency tests focus on important practical skills that are teachable in the classroom falls primarily to teachers and other curriculum specialists. Their continued imput is the the only way to maintain a positive and constructive link between teaching and minimum competency testing. As we move into the eighties, certain minimal competency tests will almost surely face legal challenges to their curricular vakidity. As tests are thus required to test only what is taught, teachers and curriculum specialists will become increasingly critical of such tests' contents, since they will be held responsible for teaching what the tests contain.

Teachers have also been influential in voicing concern over the proper place of the three R's in elementary and secondary schools' curricula. The focus of public criticism and legislative response has been primarily in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. As pressure for performance in these areas mounts, the question of emphasis emerges. As a school applies its available resources to raising every student's level of literacy and numeracy to an acceptable standard, what will become of the other areas we now consider to be part of the basic educational experience? Academic subjects such as science and history are affected, as well as such traditional targets as art and music.

I believe the eighties will not see the emergence of schools devoted exclusively to the three R's, but will reflect the concerns of teachers and others for preserving the well-round curriculum that has come to be considered necessary for citizenship in our increasingly complex world.

The question of the possibility of the minimum level set on minimal competency tests' becoming the maximum level has also been raised repeatedly by those directly involved in instruction. The concern is a legitimate one: minimal standards are just that--they cannot serve simultaneously as challenges to the more able student. But the problem does not lie in defining a minimum standard. Minima have always been with us; teachers have known for centuries that a "passing" grade can be very low indeed, yet some students will continue to strive for distinction. The problem lies instead with the current emphasis on the students who perform at or below the minimum level, and the concern that is voiced reflects a desire to remember the more able student as well. Teachers have historically been torn between providing for the great needs of the less able student, while at the same time, attempting to do justice to the great capacities of their gifted students. As long as we can perceive the dilemma inherent in this situation, I think we are in no danger of succumbing to the "minimum becoming the maximum."

Problem 5: Measurement and the Tests

The question of the tests to be used in minimal competency testing programs is an obvious one. Public attention has focussed on the testing aspect of minimal competency programs to such an extent that testing has been seriously overemphasized in many programs. Consequently, it is necessary to begin by saying that there is more to good minimal competency testing programs than tests themselves, but no good testing program can be founded on poor instruments.

Several traditional issues in measurement surfaced in the consideration of minimal competency tests. The questions of validity and selection of appropriate criteria for judging test validity are examples. In minimal competency testing, it is often difficult to define a group of people that all concerned would be willing to use a criterion for judging minimal competence. Some have tried such waffling categories as "successfully functioning adults," or have attempted such characterizations as "off welfare and not in jail." The difficulties with such attempts at defining a criterion group are readily apparent, as is the important role played by value judgments. Current minimal competency testing programs seem to be most successful when they define their students' successes in terms of performance on specific objectives rather than in terms of comparisons with some out-of-school group.

In my previous discussion of curriculum, I mentioned the importance of establishing tests' curricular validity. This is not only a major consideration from a measurement point-of-view, but it is also likely to become a major area of legal contention. I anticipate that the eighties will bring renewed efforts on the part of test-makers and educators to ensure the closest possible match between test content and curriculum in the basic skills areas.

The problem of setting appropriate performance standards is another measurement issue that separates minimal competency testing programs into the competent and the incompetent. In many of the early minimal competency testing programs in the seventies, the question of standards was addressed only cursorially, if at all. It was assumed either that everyone knew what a "passing" score on a test was; or that the test-maker had a formula or some other secret way that could tell you what the passing score on a particular test should be. Those who implemented minimal competency testing programs without prior attention to setting publicly defensible standards learned immediately, and to their great distress, not to do this. Educators have quickly come to the conclusion that the setting of standards is a crucial part of minimal competency testing programs. What remains as our task for the eighties is to increase understanding of the role played by professional judgment in the standards-setting process, and to improve our knowledge of how best to structure such judgments to produce the fairest and most defensible standard possible.

What of the Future?

Minimal competency testing seems to be gaining momentum as we enter the eighties, but, happily, I foresee its emphasis changing for the better. Legislation concerning minimal competency testing is becoming increasingly sophisticated, as it reflects the realities experienced by previous testing programs and closer attention to the complexities surrounding testing and certification. Educators are becoming less defensive about minimal competency testing as we begin to experience the positive impact on curriculum, community relations, and student expectations. The public is seeing positive action on the part of schools to be responsive to public concerns. At the same time, the public is becoming increasingly conversant with education and its processes and problems.

What can we, as educators and concerned parties, do to maximize minimal competency testing's positive impact? Keep a cool head. Remember that the problems of minimal competency testing are difficult, but that they are not new. And remember that in education as well as in real life, what you end up with will reflect the values that have gone into its making--so consider carefully what they are, and consider carefully the distinct possibility that you will get what you ask for.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY: A NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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My trade is the asseessment of pupil achievement in learning. Such assessments are intimately and extensively involved in minimum competency programs. They are used to determine whether or not the specified minimum has been achieved. They also define operationally the nature of the desired competency. The success or failure of a minimum competency program depends very largely on the quality of the assessments of learning involved in it.

Like many other trades, that of assessing educational achievement is partly art and partly science. The art requires a special skill. The science requires a special body of knowledge. Neither the art nor the science is likely to be well developed in non-specialists, however intelligent or generally well educated they may be. Depsite this, the means used to assess pupil achievement in learning have often been attacked sharply by persons whose qualifications as critics are mainly their verbal fluency and their self assurance. Indeed, the less one knows about the art and science of assessing educational achievement, the easier it is to be emphatically critical about the means used to make the assessment.

1. The rationale for testing

The rationale for using tests to assess competence is relatively simple and straight-forward. It can be summarized in two positions.

a. The main element of competence in most human activities is knowledge of what to do; knowledge of how to do it.

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b. The extent of a person's knowledge can be assessed by asking questions that require the use of knowledge; questions that will be answered correctly by one who has, and incorrectly by one who lacks, the requisite knowledge.

The knowledge referred to in these two positions is much more than remembered information. It is a structure of understandings that the person has built out of information by thinking. It is also verbal knowledge, that is, knowledge that can be expressed in words. The peculiar excellence of human beings, the ability that sets us apart from all other creatures under heaven, is our ability to produce and to use verbal knowledge. Because it can be communicated and recorded so readily, it is a very powerful form of knowledge. Most of the thinking we do is done with the help of verbal symbols for concepts and verbal expressions of ideas.

To say that knowledge is the main element of competence in most human activities is not to deny the importance of effort, of determination, of appearance, of charm, of friendliness, of luck, to success in some activities. It is not to say that knowledge is all there is to competence. But it is to say that knowing what to do and how to do it are essential to most kinds of human competence. Note too that knowledge, the cognitive contribution to competence, is what schools are best suited to help their pupils to develop.

For as long as schools have existed tests have been used to assess the extent and the depth of the knowledge pupils have developed. What better way of determining how much useful knowledge the pupils have at their disposal than by asking them to use it? True, the conditions of the test are somewhat artificial, but this artificiality does much more to increase the efficiency and precision of the assessment than to mar its relevance.

Test scores are quantative indications of achievement. It is sometimes said that not all human achievements lend themselves to quantitative assessments, that some are qualitative. But it does not follow from this that tests are limited to assessing quantitative achievements. Numbers can be used to indicate differences in quality as well as differences in quantity. There is a scale of numbers used to indicate the hardness of a gem stone or the sensitivity of a photographic emulsion. The quantity of correct answers on a test is an indication of the quality of a person's knowledge of the subject matter of the test. If differences in a quality are worth assessing, they can be indicated by differences in numbers that reflect different amounts of that quality. Numerical scores from an appropriate test can be used to report the assessment of any aspect of achievement in learning.

2. Multiple-choice test questions

What kind of questions should the test include? The modern tendency is to use objective, machine-gradable choice questions for all large scale assessments of achievements in learning. This tendency has been criticized frequently and sharply on several grounds.

a. That giving the pupils correct answers to the questions asked makes their task too easy to really test their knowledge.

b. That choice of the correct answer is a matter of simple recognition, requiring no deep thought or thorough understanding.

c. That questions to which brief alternative answers are available tend to be isolated, trivial factual details.

d. That luck in guessing the correct answers can give an examinee who has only mediocre knowledge a high score on a multiple-choice test.

Test specialists tend to give three general answers to criticisms such as these. The first is that they are products of casual speculation rather than careful study. Data are seldom presented to support them. On the contrary when relevant data have been gathered, the usual conclusion is that the criticism has little foundation.

The second answer is that despite limitations and imperfections they provide useful information. They yield reliable measures, They discriminate clearly between those who are known from other sources of information to have more, and those known to have less of the knowledge being tested. The third answer is that no alternative type of test question gives better indications of achievement in most areas of knowledge. The most frequently suggested alternative is the essay test. But scores on essay tests are typically imprecise and undependable. It is difficult to show clearly that they measure that differs from what is measured on a multiple-choice test. Unless the measurements are different, how can one be better than the other?

Multiple-choice questions that require little more than recall of factual details can be written, but few questions of that kind are likely to be found in a good test of achievement. For it is also possible to write multiple-choice questions that require the use of reasoning as well as recall. Pupils must make inferences from and applications of knowledge that will lead to correct answers. In a good test of achievement in learning most of the items will require more than simple recall.

The influence of chance and guessing on multiple-choice test scores is often overestimated. Very seldom do pupils feel obliged or inclined to guess blindly at the answer to a multiple-choice test question. Almost never can a pupil get a satisfactory score on a multiple-choice test by blind guessing alone. If the scores from a test show high reliability, as do the scores from many multiple-choice tests, then the amount of blind guessing must have been very small, for guessing destroys reliability.

There is no longer room for reasonable doubt that pupil achievements in learning can be measured by means of multiple-choice tests. Good tests are available and more can be made. Of course not all tests are good. Of course test scores are not always used wisely. But the quality of pupil achievements in learning has suffered far more from neglect or avoidance of testing than from the use of poor tests or from the misuse of test scores. The current interest in programs of testing for minimum competency promises to put an end to that neglect and avoidance.

3. Support for minimum competency testing

The notion of testing for minimum competency is more popular among taxpayers and legislators than it is among teachers. In supporting such testing the public is reacting to mounting evidence of low achievement is learning: declining test scores, semi-literate graduates, and the need for remedial programs in colleges. In opposing such testing the teachers are resisting the imposition of yet another obligation that may be difficult for them to meet, given current conditions in school classrooms. Neither stance is unreasonable, but if we want good schooling for our children, if we want education to serve our democracy the way it needs to be served, it is clear that the public must prevail. Surely the public has the authority and power to prevail. If conditions in our classrooms make it difficult or impossible for maintain reasonable standards of achievement in learning, then those conditions must be changed. With wise guidance from educational leaders and strong support from the public, teachers can make classroom conditions what they ought to be. Testing for minimum competency can be a potent catalyst for the needed change.

4. The pursuit of excellence

The main reason why levels of pupil achievement have sagged in recent decades is that schools have not given highest priority to the pursuit of excellence in leanring. Other things like progressive methods, pupil adjustments, favorable self concepts, and humanistic teaching have received more attention. The emphasis has been on processes of instruction rather than on the learning products; on innovations in methods rather than on quality of results. Of course the changes in education in the twentieth century were all intended to be improvements. But they did not emphasize the facilitation of learning as the primary mission of the school. They were not much concerned with individual excellence, or even adequacy in learning. Is it surprising that achievements in learning have declined?

Minimum competency requirements are concerned with adequacy, not with excellence. They are a step in the right direction, but only a step. A school committed to excellence in learning must test to assess excellence, as well as adequacy. Further, simple testing for a desired outcome will not produce that outcome. That is a task for teaching and study and learning. But testing is essential. It will focus attention on excellence as a goal. It will provide, or be a means for providing, motivation, recognition and rewards for successful efforts to teach and to learn.

5. The responsibility of pupils

A second reason why levels of pupil achievement have sagged in recent decades is that we have tended to overlook and minimize the essential role and responsibility of the pupil. In trying to help pupils to learn we have over-directed them, over-protected them, given them more help than is good for them. In the process we have denied them the opportunity of learning how to learn for themselves. We have worked on teaching machines, programmed instruction, and individually guided education in an attempt to "deliver" an education to our pupils. But education cannot be delivered. It must be achieved, and largely as a result of the learner's own efforts.

Two bad things are likely to happen when teachers inflate their own roles in the teaching-learning process, and their own responsibility for its success. Their pupils will learn much less than they ought to learn, and they will come to dislike schooling. For by denying the freedom of their pupils to learn, and occasionally to fail in learning, by themselves, their teachers deprive them from experiencing the joy of accomplishments for which they themselves were mainly responsible.

6. Responding to pupil fialure

Teachers cannot, and ought not to try, to guarantee the success of every pupil in learning anything that needs to be learned. Some failures may be school failures. Some may be teacher failures. But some surely are pupil failures. If we give our pupils much of the credit, as we should, when learning succeeds, let us also ask them to accept much of the blame when it fails. It is important for schools and teachers to do all they can to minimize the number and severity of pupil failures. But many deficiencies in learning could be corrected by greater effort on the part of the pupil. They should be held responsible for making the necessary effort.

No pupil who has failed to achieve a minimum level of competence in one grade should be promoted to the next. To do so is to condemn the pupil to continuing frustration and failure as deficits in learning continue to accumulate. To do so is to present the appearance of achievement where little or none exists. Schools cannot deal effectively with failure by ignoring it or pretending that it does not occur. They ought not to act as if achievement or non-achievement in learning are all the same to them.

A pupil who is not promoted might be required to repeat the grade with a different, younger class. Sometimes this helps, but not always. Perhaps a better tactic is to assign the pupil to special instruction in an "opportunity room". In some schools pupils who have not achieved minimum competency are required to enroll for summer instruction. The common element in all of these treatments is insistence on a satisfactory minimum of progress in learning as a condition of promotion.

If none of these tactics is successful in persuading the pupil to contribute his share of effort to the task of getting an education, the only reasonable course of action is to suspend the pupil from school. No pupil should be allowed to use the facilities of a good school, to occupy the time of a good teacher, or to interfere by action or example with the achievements of other pupils, unless that pupil is willing to make reasonable efforts to learn. If current laws prevent schools from acting reasonably to do the best possible job of educating their pupils, those laws need to be changed. Making school attendance compulsory was never intended to interfere with learning. If the school is to function as an effective educational institution it should not allow itself to be used as an ineffective social service agency. It should accept responsibility for educating only those young people who are willing to work to learn.

7. The definition of minimum competency

There are two quite different bases for definitions of minimum competency. One is to obtain a consensus among a group of educators on a list of specific knowledges and abilities that can be certified as the minimum requirements for competence in a given subject at a given age. Decisions on what to include on, and what to exclude from such a list are bound to to be rather arbitrary and hard to defend. Such a list has the virture of specificity and definiteness. It has the defect of encouraging a very narrow focus in teaching, of too much "teaching to the test". It has the defect of requiring a special very low level test that does not measure, and hence offers no recognition and rewards for levels of achievement above the minimum.

Another approach is to define minimum competency as that level of achievement in learning the things the school is trying to teach while almost all normal pupils are able to reach or exceed. What the school tries to teach is, or ought to be, important for most pupils to know. How much of it the pupils learn is likely to vary, in infinitely small differences, from very much to very little. Those who have learned least are most likely to be those who have not put much effort into study. They are most likely to have difficulty in learning successfully in the next grade.

This is a relative definition of minimum competency. Just as excellence is always defined in relative terms, so can deficiency be defined in relative terms. The effect of identifying the least successful 1% to 5% of the pupils as having failed, and as requiring special instructional effort is to motivate almost all of the below average students to work harder to avoid the stigma and inconvenience of failure. A relative definition of minimum competence has the virtue of allowing use of a test that samples a wide variety of learning achievements, and provides differentiation of levels of achievement across a wide range.

For almost all pupils relative failure can be avoided. If any pupil doing his or her best falls victim to relative failure, there is something wrong with the educational program the school has designed for that pupil. It is usually not true , as is sometimes said, that with this definition of minimum competence someone always has to fail. What is much truer is that in any typical group of pupils there are likely to be someone who are unwilling to do what needs to be done to avoid failing.

8. Objections to minimum competency testing

Not all of those concerned with education agree that testing for minimum competency is a good thing. Some may believe that schools have a more important mission then the cultivation of cognitive competence. Those who do ought to be able to describe in some detail how the success of a school in accomplishing that more important mission can be assessed.

Some may believe that quality control of the educational process is impossible, or unnecessary, or even harmful. Those who do ought to give up urging the public to support good skills, for without evidence of quality the claim of goodness has no foundation.

Some may believe that testing for minimum competency provides inadequate control of the quality of the educational product. Those who do are right. They are likely to urge schools, not to abandon *minimum* competency testing, but to extend the testing to assess all levels of competency.

We can not achieve excellence in education without being willing to pay what it costs in hard work, and disappointment and perseverance. But for most of us as individuals, and for our society as a whole, competence is worth far more then it costs. Let us test for it and determine to achieve it.